

Eight hundred years ago, in the city of Kalyan, a man called Basavanna assembled a congregation of poets, mystics, social revolutionaries and philosophers, unmatched for their creativity and social commitment in the history of Karnataka, even perhaps of India itself. They opposed idolatry, rejected temple worship, upheld the equality of the sexes and condemned the caste system. But events took a violent turn when they acted on their beliefs and a brahmin girl married a 'low-caste' boy. The movement ended in bloodshed. *Talé-danḍa* ('Death by Beheading') deals with the few weeks during which a vibrant, prosperous society plunged into anarchy and terror.

Prajavani, the largest circulated Kannada daily, acclaimed *Talé-danḍa* for its brilliant analysis of the ills that plague Indian society today, while *Kannada Prabha* considers it 'the most significant landmark since *Tughlaq*.' The play has been performed in several Indian languages, and this English translation by the author makes it accessible to another audience.

GIRISH KARNAD was born in Matheran, near Bombay, in 1938. He was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, and later a Homi Bhabha Fellow. His first play, *Yayati* (1961), a re-telling of a myth from the Mahabharata, won critical acclaim. But it was his second play, *Tughlaq* (1964), that established him as one of the foremost playwrights of India.

Hayavadana (1971) won the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and the Natya Sangha Award. *Naga-Mandala* (1988) was presented by the Guthrie Theatre of Minneapolis, one of the most prestigious regional theatres of the USA, as part of its Thirtieth Anniversary Season.

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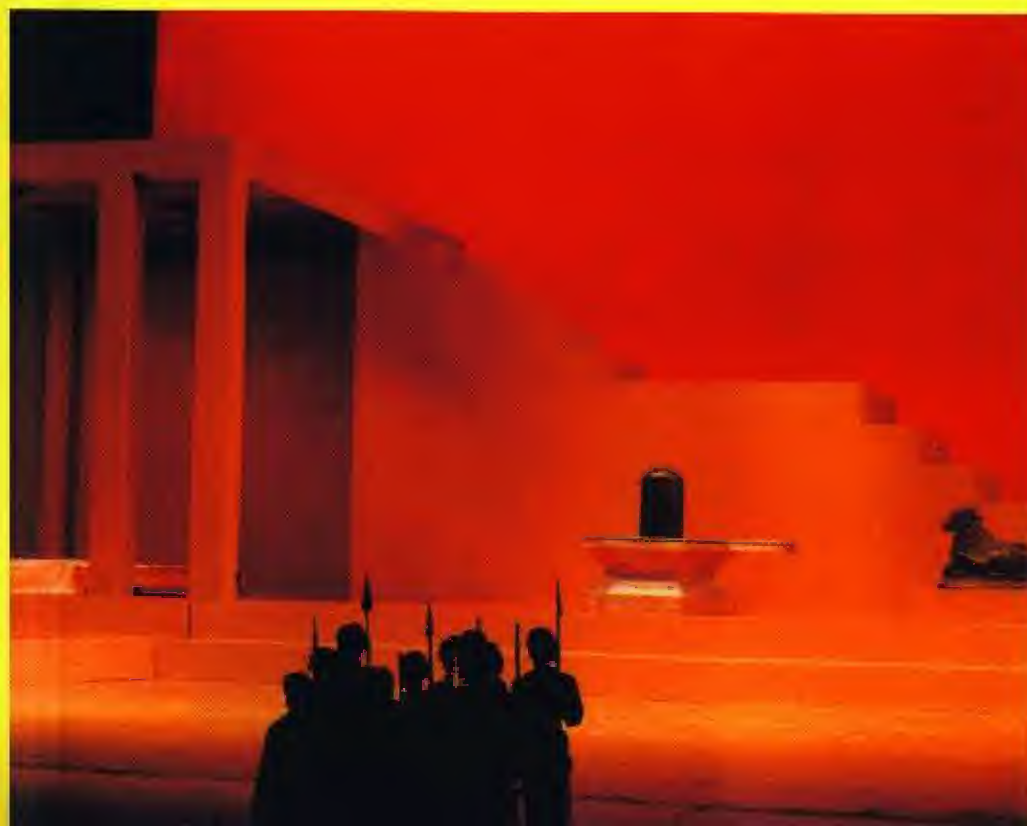
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TALÉ-DANḌA

a play

GIRISH KARNAD



TALÉ-DANḌA

GIRISH KARNAD

Translated from the original Kannada
by the author



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Preface

During the two decades ending in AD 1168, in the city of Kalyan, a man called Basavanna assembled a congregation of poets, mystics, social revolutionaries and philosophers. Together they created an age unmatched in the history of Karnataka for its creativity, courageous questioning and social commitment. Spurning Sanskrit, they talked of God and man in the mother-tongue of the common people. They condemned idolatry and temple worship. Indeed, they rejected anything 'static' in favour of the principle of movement and progress in human enterprise. They believed in the equality of sexes and celebrated hard, dedicated work. They opposed the caste system, not just in theory but in practice. This last act brought down upon them the wrath of the orthodox. The movement ended in terror and bloodshed.

I wrote *Talē-danḍa* in 1989 when the 'Mandir' and the 'Mandal' movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers were for our age. The horror of subsequent events and the religious fanaticism that has gripped our national life today have only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions they offered.

GIRISH KARNAD

TALÉ-DANḌA

TALÉ-DANḌA literally means death by beheading (*Talé*: Head. *Danḍa*: Punishment).

Offering one's head, either on completion of a vow or in penitence, was a common practice in medieval Karnataka.

Basavanna often uses the word to express his outrage at a particularly unpleasant situation or accusation, to mean something like 'May my head roll' or 'I offer my head—'.

The translations of the free verse lyrics by Basavanna used in the play are all by A.K. Ramanujan, who brought this extraordinary body of work to the attention of the world outside. Three of them have already appeared in his anthology, *Speaking of Siva* (Penguin Books, 1973). The rest he translated specially for this English version. Tragically, Ramanujan died a few months before it was published.

In Karnataka, as elsewhere in India, a man has only to open his mouth and his speech will give away his caste, his geographical origins, even his economic status. In the original Kannada version of *Talé-danḍa*, the language of the play engages with the implications of this fact for a situation in which a group of people are trying to fight caste and social inequality. For obvious reasons, this aspect of the problem is not explored in the English translation.

CHARACTERS

In order of appearance

SAMBASHIVA SHASTRI	Brahmin, Jagadeva's father
AMBA	Jagadeva's mother
BHAGIRATHI	Brahmin woman
SAVITRI	Jagadeva's wife
JAGADEVA	<i>Sharana</i> , Brahmin by birth
MALLIBOMMA	<i>Sharana</i> , Tanner by birth
SOVIDEVA	Bijjala's son
RAMBHAVATI	Bijjala's queen
DAMODARA BHATTA	Queen's priest
KALLAPPA	Bijjala's bodyguard
BIJJALA	King of Kalyan
BASAVANNA	The great <i>Sharana</i> saint poet
MANCHANNA KRAMITA	Brahmin, adviser to the king
GUNDANNA	<i>Sharana</i>
KALAYYA	<i>Sharana</i>
KAKKAYYA	<i>Sharana</i> , Skinner by birth
GANGAMBIKA	Basavanna's wife
HARALAYYA	<i>Sharana</i> , Cobbler by birth
KALYANI	Haralayya's wife
SHEELAVANTA	Haralayya's son
MADHUVARASA	<i>Sharana</i> , Brahmin by birth
LALITAMBA	Madhuvarasa's wife
KALAVATI	Madhuvarasa's daughter
INDRANI	Courtesan
MARIAPPA	Boy attendant
BANKANNA	Boy attendant
EERAVVA	Queen's maid
RACHAPPA	Palace guard

Brahmins, palace servants, crowds, tribals, *sharanas*, Indrani's woman, soldiers and messengers.

ACT ONE

Scene One

AD 1168

The Brahmin quarter of the city of Kalyan. SAMBASHIVA SHASTRI's house. The SHASTRI is lying in bed in a room. He is ill. Next to him sit his wife, AMBA, and her friend, BHAGIRATHI. SAVITRI, the SHASTRI's daughter-in-law, aged about fourteen, mixes medicine in the kitchen. Suddenly the SHASTRI begins to call out.

SHASTRI. Jagganna—Jagadeva—Come here, son. Where are you? Come soon.

AMBA. Please stop that. You have ripped your throat to shreds calling for him.

SHASTRI. Get him here, immediately. Tell him I want him here. I'm afraid when he's not near me. Jagganna—

BHAGIRATHI. Poor soul! How he torments himself! Can't you send for Jagganna again, Ambakka?

AMBA. I would have. But is there any point? They say there is a crowd of about twenty thousand people around the Treasury. Govind says he was almost trampled to death reaching Jagganna. And after all that, Jagganna had no time for him. He was only concerned about the Treasury. If he cared, don't you think he would have looked in here some time during these four days? He knows his father is ill—

SHASTRI. Is Jagganna here? Why hasn't he come? Jagadeva . . . Jagganna . . .

AMBA (*wiping her tears*). Jagganna's inflicting every torture in hell on us for having borne him.

BHAGIRATHI. Besides, is it wise to antagonize the Yuvaraj and the royal family like this? Robber barons, after all. I wouldn't put anything past them.

SHASTRI. I'm afraid. Jagganna . . .

AMBA. He has seen with his own eyes what happened to his father when he stood up to the King. The whole world collapsed around us.

SHASTRI (*enraged*). I'm screaming my head off here and all you do is stand there. Go, bring him. Instantly. Go. Jagadeva—

He tries to get up but, racked by a vicious coughing fit, falls back panting.

AMBA. Savitri—Savitri—

BHAGIRATHI. Is the medicine ready, Savitri? Hurry up.

SAVITRI rushes from the kitchen with the medicine. She hands it over to AMBA, who pours it into the SHASTRI's mouth. He quietens down.

BHAGIRATHI. Why can't that Basavanna see some sense? In every household in Kalyan, it's the same story. Father against son—brother against brother.

AMBA. And our son sent Savitri back to her parents just to show us how annoyed he is. But why blame Basavanna, Bhagirathi? We must suffer what's written in our foreheads.

JAGADEVA and MALLIBOMMA come on the street in front of the house. They are both around nineteen. They are in high spirits.

JAGADEVA. Come in.

MALLIBOMMA. Don't be silly. I shouldn't have even stepped into this Brahmin street. And you want me to come into your house? No, thank you.

JAGADEVA. Come on. Let's show them.

MALLIBOMMA. You go in now. I'd better return home, too.

JAGADEVA. That won't do. You must come in. Don't be afraid. I'm here. Come on!

He starts dragging MALLIBOMMA by his arm. MALLIBOMMA resists.

BHAGIRATHI (*getting up*). Jagganna's come. I'll be off.

She goes out. SAVITRI follows her to the door and watches her husband from a distance.

JAGADEVA. Don't make a fuss, Malli. Or else—

MALLIBOMMA. No, please, listen to me—

BHAGIRATHI (*at the door*). Why, Jagganna, your poor father is killing himself there crying out for you. And you hold court here?

JAGADEVA. How does that concern you? You'd better look after your husband. You know where he is—

BHAGIRATHI (*to MALLIBOMMA*). Who are you, boy?

JAGADEVA. He's my friend, Mallibomma.

BHAGIRATHI (*ignoring JAGADEVA*). This is a Brahmin household. Do you mind standing a little aside so the women of the house can move about freely? What are we to do if you plant yourself on the doorstep like a feudal chieftain?

MALLIBOMMA, mortified, tries to move aside but JAGADEVA doesn't let him.

JAGADEVA. This is my house, Bhagakka, and he is a friend of mine. My friends will come here when they like and stand where they choose. If that's not to your liking, you are free to stay as far from here as you wish.

BHAGIRATHI. I'd do just that son, except that your mother, poor thing, is alone and without help. And I gather that before taking off with your *sharana* cronies, you sent your wife home to her family—just to spite your parents?

AMBA (*comes out*). Come in, Jagga. Why are you standing on the steps like a stranger?

JAGADEVA. Mother, you tell Mallibomma yourself. I won't set foot in the house unless he comes in with me.

MALLIBOMMA. No, really. I must go.

AMBA. Come in, Malli.

MALLIBOMMA (*explaining*). You see, Ma'am . . . I'm the son of Tanner Kariya.

Pause.

AMBA. My son won't come into the house unless you do. So come in, please. I'll have the house purified later. Please, I beg of you—with folded hands—

MALLIBOMMA (*horrified*). Oh, Ma'am. Please don't say such things.

AMBA. Then come in.

The doors of neighbouring houses fill up with women, children and old men watching.

JAGADEVA. Look how they've collected! You'd think there was some kind of witchcraft going on here. (*Loudly*) Are you all listening? All attention? This is my friend Mallibomma. He is the son of a tanner. And I am taking him inside our house. Are you satisfied? Come on, Mallibomma—

The three step into the house. MALLIBOMMA is half dead with embarrassment. JAGADEVA is surprised to see SAVITRI behind the door.

JAGADEVA (*growls*). When did you come back? Didn't I say I would send for you?

AMBA. I sent for her. I was alone here. You went off with the *sharanas* and didn't even bother to check if we were dead or alive here. How much can one ask of the neighbours? So embarrassing to—

JAGADEVA. But I had no choice, Mother. I had to go. It would have been disastrous if I hadn't! Listen. That day, Accountant Kishtachari's son casually mentioned to me that the Yuvaraj was planning to open the doors of the Treasury. And instantly I smelt mischief! The King is not in town. Basavanna is away. And the lock of the Treasury cannot be touched unless either the King or his Treasurer is physically present: that is the law. So why should the honourable Yuvaraj Sovideva pick this moment to inspect the accounts? Most intriguing . . .

AMBA (*spreading a mat*). Sit down, Malli. (To JAGADEVA) I hope

you don't need to be reminded that you have a father—and that he has cried himself hoarse calling out to you.

JAGADEVA (*looks into the bedroom*). He's asleep? Good! (*Comes out.*) I went from door to door, immediately, waking up the *sharanas*. I lost my voice telling everyone that something sinister was going on. But no one would move.

AMBA. Can't the King's Treasurer handle his own affairs?

JAGADEVA. I told you, Basavanna wasn't in town. He was away in Bannoor with Kakkayya, initiating the untouchables there into our fold. (To MALLIBOMMA) Do you know—Basavanna himself told me—all the untouchables there have accepted our faith and become *sharanas*!

MALLIBOMMA (*excited*). Marvellous! (To AMBA) The problem, Ma'am, is that once Basavanna involves himself in such matters, nothing will make him budge. Even if we had sent for him, he would have ignored us. One can't say what might have happened if Jagganna hadn't taken it upon himself to rally the *sharanas* that day. The Yuvaraj would have fixed the accounts and ruined Basavanna's reputation!

JAGADEVA (*laughing*). But once the *sharanas* were up, there was no stopping them. No less than five to six thousand—

MALLIBOMMA. Five to six? More, more. There were at least ten—

JAGADEVA. But that was later. Initially, no one would react. There were barely—

MALLIBOMMA. Ma'am, you should have seen how they treated Jagganna—like a real leader! For the past four days fifteen thousand *sharanas* have been following his commands implicitly—

AMBA. I see, and he gave up all that glory for the sake of his ailing father! Very noble of him, I'm sure.

JAGADEVA (*pleading*). Please, Mother, try to understand. I would have come home sooner. But there was no way I could leave till Basavanna himself returned and took charge. That Yuvaraj was in the Treasury—and no trick is

too filthy for him. Basavanna returned from Bannoor just half an hour ago. Didn't even go home. Came to the Treasury direct and, do you know, the first thing he said was 'I am sorry to hear your father is unwell. You go home. I am here. I'll come and meet your father later.' Can you imagine? In the middle of all that confusion! (To MALLIBOMMA) He is no ordinary man, I tell you. I'm sure he's the incarnation of the divine bull, Nandi.

The SHASTRI moans inside. JAGADEVA gets up and goes in.

MALLIBOMMA. Jagganna, take your father's head on your lap. Rub his forehead. He'll feel better.

JAGADEVA does as told, but awkwardly. MALLIBOMMA speaks to AMBA.

We didn't know his father was so ill, Ma'am. I would certainly have sent him home sooner—

SHASTRI. Put it down on the floor.

AMBA. He's up.

She goes in. MALLIBOMMA watches from the outer room.

SHASTRI. Why are you sitting idle? Pick it up. Put it on the floor.

JAGADEVA. Father, I'm here. I shan't go away again. Don't be afraid.

SHASTRI. Take it off the bed. Be quick. Why are you ignoring it? Pick it up—

JAGADEVA. Pick what up, Father?

SHASTRI. Me.

JAGADEVA. What are you saying?

SHASTRI. It's lying there unattended. Put it on the floor, fold its legs, otherwise it won't fit on to the bier. Jagganna—where is Jagganna? Send for the bamboos and rope.

JAGADEVA. I'm here.

SHASTRI. Not you—I want my son! There is so much to do.

Your mother. Attend to her hair. Her head has to be shaved—

AMBA. I can't bear this. God, what have I done in my past lives to have to listen to all this?

She runs in weeping. MALLIBOMMA, seeing the seriousness of the situation and aware that his continued presence will only create more problems, quietly slips away. SAVITRI stands in the doorway, watching JAGADEVA, and weeps.

SHASTRI. Jagga—

JAGADEVA. I'm here.

SHASTRI. Not you. My son! He has to be there for the cremation. Tell him the corpse is beginning to stink. It'll get worse. Call him. Jagganna—come. Remove the corpse—

Scene Two

BIJJALA's palace.

The Chamber of Queen RAMBHAVATI. She is unwell and mostly sits on a couch, reclining against the wall. SOVIDEVA, her son, aged twenty, paces up and down. Adjacent to the Chamber is the god's room with a linga in it. In size, the linga is large enough to be worthy of the palace. The priest, DAMODARA BHATTA, aged thirty, is performing the pooja.

SOVIDEVA (*screaming*). I shall bury them alive! Hack them to pieces and feed them to my hounds!

RAMBHAVATI. Calm yourself! Don't get into a fight with those *sharanas*, son. If your father comes to know, there'll be—

SOVIDEVA. It's he who's encouraged those sons of slaves. It's because of him that the vermin can be so brazen, so impudent. I am the Yuvaraj of the Kalachurya dynasty—and those louts have the insolence to make a fool of me in front of the whole city? They know they can get away with anything—

DAMODARA BHATTA *does arati before the linga. Mother and son stand and fold their hands. The priest steps out of the room, extends the arati towards the two. They spread their palms to receive the warmth of the flame and put a few coins in the plate.*

RAMBHAVATI. Come, Sovi. Sit next to me.

SOVIDEVA. No, I won't.

RAMBHAVATI. Come on.

She forces him to sit by her side.

Why do you want to tangle with those *sharanas*? Leave the King's affairs alone—

SOVIDEVA. Stop telling me what to do! I'm sick and tired of being at the receiving end all the time. I won't put up with it any more—

RAMBHAVATI (*tired*). Do as you wish. Just don't upset your father, that's all. He turns his bad temper on me and I can't take it any longer.

SOVIDEVA. Basavanna has been systematically defrauding the Treasury. Accountant Kishtachari has evidence to show he has bilked us of thirty thousand sovereigns. And yet he continues to be the King's Treasurer—our Minister of Finance! Father is totally in his thrall, I tell you. And so are you!

RAMBHAVATI. What am I to do? Do you think your father ever listens to me?

SOVIDEVA. Why not? If only you would put your mind to it! Each one of your step-sons was awarded his own independent domain by the time he was eighteen. That mongrel brood! They get their claims! You are a princess

of the Hoysala dynasty. Bijjala's favourite Queen. And I am your only son. And what do I have? A jangling bell to keep me occupied.

RAMBHAVATI. Don't say that, son. Who do I have other than you?

DAMODARA BHATTA *has finished his pooja. He comes out.*

DAMODARA. Forgive me for interrupting, Your Majesty. It was a mob no less than fifteen thousand strong that encircled the Treasury. Yet you should have seen how disciplined they were, how restrained! For four days they sat there, surrounding the building, ungrudging, even cheerful, until Basavanna himself came on the scene and sent them home. It was a prodigious display of loyalty to Basavanna. Would the *sharanas* be as loyal to the King? One wonders.

RAMBHAVATI (*dubious*). I don't know. Basavanna can be obstinate. But I don't think he is treacherous.

SOVIDEVA (*explodes*). There you are! So I am the villain. I should now humbly crawl . . .

DAMODARA. 'Miraculous' is the only word for the speed with which the news spread. Barely an hour had elapsed after the Yuvaraj had the locks opened—and there they were, thousands of them, swarming from every corner of Kalyan. Certainly points to an efficient network of spies within the court, doesn't it?

RAMBHAVATI. But did you find anything against Basavanna?

DAMODARA. I had warned the Yuvaraj against this—this adventure, Your Majesty. Basavanna is not one to drown in shallow waters. And suppose we had managed to prove our charges. What of it? He would merely be proved a corrupt officer of the court, like any other. If one aims to catch a tusker, one must dig a pit capacious enough to take him in entire.

KALLAPPA *enters.*

KALLAPPA. I fall at your feet, Ma'am. The Master is here.

RAMBHAVATI (*getting up, flustered*). Already? Why couldn't he let us know a little in advance? (*Shouts.*) Eeravva! Eeravva! Go call Eeravva, for heaven's sake. Ask her to get the arati ready—

KALLAPPA. The Master doesn't want any of it, Ma'am. He's already in the palace, on his way here.

RAMBHAVATI. Eeravva! (*Suddenly noticing DAMODARA BHATTA*) You may go, sir. You know how he is—

DAMODARA BHATTA *nods and leaves with a smile. SOVIDEVA tries to go out with him.*

KALLAPPA. The young Master is to remain here.

SOVIDEVA. Which snivelling spy informed him I was here? I must go. (*To RAMBHA*) You make some excuse for me—

SOVIDEVA *tries to go out. But KALLAPPA steps in his way, quietly but firmly.*

SOVIDEVA (*to his mother*). So you see how I am treated in my own house—like a toothless hound?

BIJJALA (*roars from outside*). Where is that son of a whore?

RAMBHAVATI. Come here, son. And whatever he says, keep your mouth shut.

BIJJALA *enters.*

BIJJALA. Is he hiding in here?

RAMBHAVATI. What nonsense is this? You shouldn't rush in like this—without arati or saffron-water to cast out the evil eye. Wait there now. Eeravva!

BIJJALA. May your Eeravvas and Paaravvas be cast to perdition. Is that accursed fruit of our family here?

He sees SOVIDEVA.

Come out. Come out. Aren't you ashamed to hide between a woman's legs, you blood-sodden rag, you—

SOVIDEVA *steps out.*

What were you up to in my absence? Who gave you the right to tamper with the Treasury?

He starts beating up SOVIDEVA. SOVIDEVA does not resist.

RAMBHAVATI. I beg you, don't. Don't beat him, please. I implore you in the name of our family God, I beg of you. He's a grown-up man. Don't humiliate him like this.

To SOVIDEVA.

Go—go away from here!

BIJJALA. What! He's not leaving his mother's home empty-handed, is he? Eeravva, a sari and a blouse-piece for our son. And be quick—

RAMBHAVATI. Stop it. Please! At least for my sake. Or do away with me first. Once you're rid of me, do what you will with him. But I can't bear this. Please. I fall at your feet!

BIJJALA. Rambha! Rambha! All this is your doing. You, with your pampering and swaddling, you have turned him into a royal eunuch. And I am the greater fool for having let your tears stop me. If only I had birched the skin off his back as I had with his brothers. If only I had tied him up in a bundle and dowsed him in the river. But you had to get in the way and cry and wail. It's all your doing . . .

RAMBHAVATI. You treat him as one shouldn't even one's bitterest enemy. Why? What has my son done to deserve this from you?

BIJJALA. What hasn't he done? He fiddles with the Treasury locks when he shouldn't have. And then, on top of it, when Basavanna actually arrives on the scene, he attempts to run, like a rabbit. Fifteen thousand people blocked his way and applauded and roared with laughter as Basavanna led him back by hand into the Treasury and had the doors sealed behind them. I reached the city gates this morning, exhausted, aching all over, and what news greets me, do you think? 'Basavanna and the Yuvaraj were closeted in the Treasury for eleven days, checking accounts. They

have only just finished'! Checking accounts, my bloody foot. (*To SOVIDEVA*) Did you find a broken cowrie missing from the coffers? A counterfeit coin unaccounted for in the books?

No reply.

When Basavanna puts something down on paper, it's there for good. As if planted by Brahma himself. And that's why he continues to be the King's Treasurer. Are you listening, nincompoop? Are you? Then speak out. You are quick enough to find the wrong limb to do the wrong things. But you can't find your bloody tongue —

RAMBHAVATI. Please, don't be abusive!

BIJJALA. Madam, this is not your parental home. Let's not have any of your Hoysala sanctimonious humbug here. I am a Kalachurya. Rough-hewn. Blunt. I have asked my son a question. And I am waiting for an answer. You keep out of it!

RAMBHAVATI. And what have you done to justify calling him your son? He has come of age and you haven't even thrown a scrap of land at him—

BIJJALA. Land? At this bumpkin? I give him a kingdom—And what do I do with the people in there? Push them into a bottomless pit? I fetched him a golden bride. He only had to conduct himself with a bit of sense and his father-in-law would have given him half his kingdom. He couldn't keep her. And now he aspires to be a king, does he? Let's see. Kallappa!

KALLAPPA enters.

Kallappa, this scion of the Kalachuryas craves to be a king, we are told. Now, in order to be a ruler, what is the primary qualification? Surely the ability to kick people around? That is why they say to be born a king in this life you need to have been a donkey in your last. You've heard that? Good. Now my son and heir will try to deliver

a kick on your behind. But you must not let it land. If his foot touches you, I shall skin you alive, mind. Now honourable Yuvaraj, proceed. Go on. Kick him.

SOVIDEVA tries to kick KALLAPPA. But KALLAPPA is too agile for him. SOVIDEVA makes several attempts but to no avail. BIJJALA is red with excitement and frustration as he watches.

Faster, son. Move. Why are you stuck there, leg out, like a dog pissing? Hit out. From the hip, you oaf.

Exasperated, he turns to RAMBHA.

This is the first lesson they teach in the gymnasium. And he can't manage it!

Impatient, he jumps in.

My turn now, Kallappa. If my toe so much as grazes you, you'll pay with your head.

BIJJALA takes aim and kicks. The kick catches KALLAPPA squarely on his behind. He crashes to the floor. BIJJALA roars triumphantly. Then turns to SOVIDEVA.

You next. Ready?

He sends SOVIDEVA reeling with a well-aimed kick.

Kallappa, two gold sovereigns for you. Tell the clerk. He'll pay you. It's not your fault you lost. Bijjala hasn't lost his touch yet.

KALLAPPA bows to him and exits, brushing his behind. BIJJALA glares after him.

That sly bastard! I shall never know if he hasn't made an ass of me.

RAMBHAVATI, who has not watched any of the above, opens her eyes and pushes SOVIDEVA out. Then she sits back, crying. BIJJALA sits next to her, tired, defeated.

BIJJALA. So many, so many women came and went. Not one

of them could keep hold of me. Then you came. The world knows there hasn't been another. And then . . .
(*Spits.*) this rat has to crawl out of your womb.

Noise outside.

What's that commotion, Kallappa?

KALLAPPA (*enters*). Basavanna is here for an audience, Master.

BIJJALA. I knew it! Seat him in the inner chamber. He is too unpredictable for the audience hall.

KALLAPPA *exits*.

RAMBHAVATI. I'm baffled by your infatuation for that man. He mocks your son in front of the world, and instead of tarring his face in public you invite him into the inner chamber?

BIJJALA (*glares at her*). You and your son! In all these fifteen years, you haven't understood a thing about Basavanna, have you? Or about me, for that matter! Who am I? I am Bijjala, the Emperor of Kalyan, the strong-shouldered Kalachurya conqueror! And yet—what is my caste? Tell me.

RAMBHAVATI. What has that to do with it?

BIJJALA. I have asked you a question. Answer it!

RAMBHAVATI. We are Kshatriyas.

BIJJALA. Your family—the Hoysalas, *you* may be Kshatriyas. But I am a Kalachurya. Katta churra. A barber. His Majesty King Bijjala is a barber by caste. For ten generations my forefathers ravaged the land as robber barons. For another five they ruled as the trusted feudatories of the Emperor himself. They married into every royal family in sight. Bribed generations of Brahmins with millions of cows. All this so they could have the caste of Kshatriyas branded on their foreheads. And yet you ask the most innocent child in my Empire: what is Bijjala, son of Kalachurya Permadi, by caste? And the instant reply will be: a barber! One's caste is like the skin on one's body. You can peel it off

top to toe, but when the new skin forms, there you are again: a barber—a shepherd—a scavenger!

Pause.

In all my sixty-two years, the only people who have looked me in the eye without a reference to my lowly birth lurking deep in their eyes are the *sharanas*: Basavanna and his men. They treat me as—as what?—(*Almost with a sense of wonder.*) as a human being. Basavanna wants to eradicate the caste structure, wipe it off the face of the earth. Annihilate the varna system. What a vision! And what prodigious courage! And he has the ability. Look at those he has gathered around him: poets, mystics, visionaries. And nothing airy-fairy about them, mind you. All hard-working people from the common stock. They sit together, eat together, argue about God together, indifferent to caste, birth or station. And all this is happening in the city of Kalyan—*my Kalyan!*

RAMBHAVATI. Then why don't you join them too? That may solve the problem—

BIJJALA. It'll solve nothing. They are insufferable moralists. You know that verse of Basavanna's?

Do not steal.

Do not kill.

Do not ever lie.

Do not rage . . .

and so on. It's not, as you can see, an ethics designed for rulers. Worse still is their bhakti, their relentless devotion, their incessant craving for the Lord's grace. I've built temples to keep my subjects happy. But the one truth I know is that I exist and God doesn't.

She giggles.

What are you giggling about?

RAMBHAVATI. Suddenly, you were as you used to be in those

days—our early years together, when you'd talk and talk and insist on my listening. Remember?

BIJJALA. Is that all you have to say? Doesn't anything interest you women except marriage and husbands and children?

RAMBHAVATI. Have you left us anything else?

Commotion outside.

BIJJALA. What the devil's that noise, Kallappa?

KALLAPPA (*enters*). Crowds, thronging to take a look at Basavanna, Master.

BIJJALA. Why? Don't the numb-skulls know he lives in this city?

KALLAPPA. Well, Master, it's this thing they say that happened in the Treasury—

BIJJALA. What?

KALLAPPA. This morning, Master. . . . They say Basavanna performed a miracle. That's why these crowds—

RAMBHAVATI. A miracle?

KALLAPPA. Yes, Ma'am. A miracle. There was a miracle. And the whole city was witness to it.

Scene Three

The inner chamber of the palace. BASAVANNA is talking to an old woman. Three or four domestics are grouped around them, listening.

BASAVANNA. But, Guddevva, your daughter-in-law is still young. So it's up to you to take a sensible view of things. May I suggest something?

GUDDEVVA. Will anyone say no to you?

BASAVANNA. They say you have a sweet voice and that you know many songs of Tanner Chennayya—

GUDDEVVA (*blushing*). *Ayyo!* Who told you all that?

BASAVANNA. Why don't you hand over your house to your daughter-in-law for a few days? Let her look after it. You come over to our house . . .

GUDDEVVA. No, thank you. You collect all those low-caste people in your house, don't you—even the untouchables? I'd rather not rub shoulders with them—

BASAVANNA (*laughs*). They'll be there, certainly. But you can choose where you want to sit. Sing what you feel like singing. They'll sing too. Then you decide whether you would like to visit us again. What do you say?

The heralds proclaim the King's entry from outside.

HERALDS. Mahārajādhirāja Kālanjarapurādhīshwara Suvarṇa-Vṛṣhabhadhwaja Damaru-toorya-nirghoshana Kalachūrya-Vamsha-Kamala-Bhāskara Triambaka-pāda-padmama-dhupa Nisshankamalla Bhujabala-Chakravarti Bijjala-Devaraj (*Crescendo*.) Bho parāk! Bho parāk!

BIJJALA *enters followed by his Brahmin adviser*, MANCHANNA KRAMITA. BASAVANNA *bows*. *The King looks at him expectantly. BASAVANNA says nothing. A long pause.*

BIJJALA. I presume you don't like our new titles.

BASAVANNA. The ears overflow, Your Majesty.

MANCHANNA. I am acutely aware they do not do full justice to His Majesty's achievements.

BASAVANNA. Perhaps His Majesty's glory would have been better served if there had been a little less Sanskrit and a little more of our mother tongue.

BIJJALA. There! Ask the honourable Manchanna Kramita: I predicted you would react like that. He composed the titles. I had to have a new stone inscription erected and he kindly obliged.

MANCHANNA. One cannot expect the common tongue to possess the grandeur and resonance of Sanskrit.

BASAVANNA (*ignoring him*). If Your Majesty's titles continue to

proliferate at this pace, I fear that all the rocks in our kingdom stacked together will not be enough to contain them.

MANCHANNA. What greater spur to expand our Empire beyond its present confines? It's very convenient for us that the neighbouring kingdoms of the Chola and Pandya are better known for their rocks than for their arts.

BASAVANNA (*flares up*). A new rock inscription. And to justify it, a new campaign. A dozen battles. A hundred new hero stones, to be greeted by the wails of a few thousand fresh widows and orphans. And then to finance this senseless self-indulgence, another wave of taxes, demands and extortions.

MANCHANNA. This life is transient, Basavanna. We shall all be gone one day. But these inscriptions will outlast the ages and sing of our King's magnificence to distant generations.

BASAVANNA. Inscriptions need eyes to decipher them. Panegyrics need tongues to sing them. Meaning is generated by this moving body and it is this human body that should be our primary concern.

MANCHANNA *is about to retort, when BIJJALA decides to take matters in hand.*

BIJJALA. Why don't you visit the court more often, Basavanna? Having you here is like adding a dose of strong spices to bland food.

BASAVANNA. Forgive me, sir. I got distracted.

He offers the King a bunch of keys.

These are the keys to the Treasury. Your Majesty was kind enough to entrust them to my care. But they feel heavy now. I must implore you to relieve me of this weight.

BIJJALA. And if I refuse?

BASAVANNA. I shall leave them by the Shiva-linga in the palace.

Pause.

BIJJALA. These last couple of years I've barely seen you at the court, except on an occasional festival day. The kingdom bristles with gossip about the deteriorating relations between the King and his Treasurer. I gather you have even written songs mocking my kingship and sung them to your congregation. Yet I have not uttered a word of rebuke nor asked you to surrender the keys—

BASAVANNA. I hope my stand has been clear, sir. I work in the Treasury not for the King's pleasure but because that wealth belongs to the people. As a guardian of the people, the King has a right to it. But no other member of the royal family is entitled to have access to it.

BIJJALA. Answer my question first. Would any other king have been as lenient and accommodating as I?

BASAVANNA. No, sir. I accept. And I am most grateful for Your Majesty's indulgence.

BIJJALA. Good then. Listen to me. Let the past be forgotten. It was a childish prank. My son is an imbecile—

MANCHANNA. Your Majesty, that's a preposterous . . .

BIJJALA (*ignoring him*). Shall I have him brought here, bound and gagged, and roll him at your feet?

BASAVANNA. It would be wrong to attribute my resignation to the Prince alone. Our congregation grows day by day and has started making greater demands on my time.

Pause.

BIJJALA. That's one of the things that irks me about you. 'The Prince'! Why do you insist on calling him a Prince? It's a title which even the King's bastards flaunt. It would make the Queen happy if you called him the Yuvaraj. I would be pleased. The court knows that—

BASAVANNA. A Yuvaraj is an heir to the throne, sir. I was not aware Your Majesty had so anointed him.

BIJJALA. Of course, I haven't. Dear man, do you imagine for a moment that my other sons will sit by meekly while I bestow that privilege on this ass? They'll tear me to shreds.

Nevertheless, when only one prince is present in the capital, it's customary to address him as the Yuvaraj.

BASAVANNA. Perhaps a new custom, sir? I'm not aware of it. But it matters little what he is called, except that the title of Yuvaraj entails certain responsibilities.

BIJJALA. You aren't going to start on that again—

BASAVANNA. Yes, I am, sir. For it can bear repetition. Kingship is a calling. A source of living, yes, but also a duty and a service to humanity. It is not an inheritance, not a family gift but a right to be earned, to be justified by diligent application.

BIJJALA (*soothing*). Don't I know it? We discussed all this threadbare fifteen years ago—

To MANCHANNA KRAMITA, *smiling*.

when I threw out the Chalukyas and grabbed their throne!

BASAVANNA. But the same words are unacceptable to you when applied to your son.

BIJJALA (*explodes*). Yes, because he's my son. My son! Do you have even the faintest idea of what a son means? My dear fellow, there are over a hundred and ninety-six thousand *sharanas* in this city of Kalyan who light a lamp every evening in your name for having given them a new life. And though they all know you have a son, a good half of them don't even know what that poor devil is called. What kind of father are you? Have some sense, Basavanna. Or, at least, read the sacred texts to acquire some. A son is the final goal of human existence! It may be that he drinks your blood and chews your bones to mash. But he is the one who'll keep your soul fed till eternity.

BASAVANNA. For a *sharana*, physical parentage is of no consequence. A person is born truly only when the guru initiates him into a life of knowledge.

BIJJALA. That's what *you* believe. As a child you tore up your sacred thread and ran away from home. Birth, caste and creed mean nothing to you. But don't you delude yourself

about your companions, friend. If you really free them from the network of brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, uncles and second cousins, and let them loose in a casteless society, they will merely sputter about like a pile of fish on the sand and die! (*Suddenly*) You don't wish to look after the Treasury any more? So be it. Give me the keys.

BASAVANNA. It's not bare relationships that matter but the meanings one brings to them. I know why Prince Sovideva tried to set a trap for me. Because he hungers for your attention. He wants a few nods of affection from you. Seat him next to you, talk to him—

BIJJALA. Perhaps that's how Brahmin boys are reared. But he is a Kshatriya. His only problem is that he hasn't tasted the lash enough. Let's not worry about my son any more. Shall we turn to your *bhaktas* instead?

BASAVANNA (*puzzled*). Sir?

BIJJALA. Kallappa, let them in.

(To BASAVANNA.)

We'll start with the servants of the palace, who've known you over the years.

KALLAPPA *lets a group of half a dozen people enter. They ignore the King, rush in and fall at BASAVANNA's feet. Some cling to his legs. Others weep.*

BASAVANNA (*taken aback*). What's all this nonsense? What are you doing?

OLD MAN. Forgive us. Forgive us, Basavanna. We didn't realize you were such a great soul—

BASAVANNA. What's got into you?

WOMAN. I've been married four years. Four children, all dead at birth. Save the next one for me, please.

KALLAPPA. Enough now. You'll get more time later. You know there are others waiting outside. Move on.

He herds them out, and lets in a new lot who also rush to clasp BASAVANNA's feet.

BASAVANNA. No! No! What foolishness is this? (*To a woman*)

Rangavva, will you at least tell me what this is all about?

RANGAVVA. Is there anything you don't know, Basavanna?

You performed the miracle—

BASAVANNA (*aghast*). I did what?

OLD MAN (*placating*). Not you, but Lord Shiva. On your behalf

—He performed it—

RANGAVVA. They say you had borrowed money from the Treasury. For your good works. Fifty thousand sovereigns.

And Shiva replaced the whole amount. When the young Master tried to catch you, there was nothing amiss.

BASAVANNA. No, never!

OLD MAN. Each empty coffer filled up right in front of their eyes. They actually had to shake the sacks to fit the coins in. Money kept pouring in.

BASAVANNA (*anguished*). Do you really believe I would steal money from the Treasury?

OLD MAN. It's not like that. Not for yourself. It was all to feed the *sharanas*—to give alms and—

RANGAVVA. Not for your own expenses, but for God's work.

BASAVANNA. So the Prince is right. I'm a thief!

RANGAVVA (*her eyes filling up*). Why do you say such dreadful things? May our tongues rot if we malign a saint like you! Don't tease us . . .

She goes out wiping her tears, followed by the others. BIJJALA signals KALLAPPA to stop further admissions.

BIJJALA. Hope you're enjoying this outburst of devotional ecstasy.

BASAVANNA (*anguished*). What's all this, Your Majesty?

MANCHANNA. In the good old days, fire sacrifices had to be performed and animals ritually slaughtered before the Vedic gods consented to descend to the earth. But since the winds of bhakti started sweeping across the continent, the gods seem only too eager to act. The devotee weeps and God performs a miracle. The devotee laughs and He

performs another. Our gods have been transformed into a mob of perpetual conjurers.

BIJJALA (*to BASAVANNA*). Today your companions would rather you were a thief so they can turn you into a wonder-worker. Tomorrow the same enthusiasts may damn you as a murderer so they can prove you've experienced Lord Shiva himself! I am an ordinary king. I want no truck with the gods. I go by the laws of the land. Which is why this mass hunger for divine grace bothers me greatly. It should bother you too.

BASAVANNA. Let them damn me as a thief, condemn me as a miracle-monger. I don't care. But to be damned as a devotee in the presence of all the great devotees!

I don't have in me
bhakti enough
to equal a sixth
of a mustard seed.
I'm an ekke, a swallow-wort
among mangoes.
How can I shamelessly
call myself a devotee
in front of the *sharanas*
of our Lord of the meeting of rivers?

Will Shiva perform miracles for the sake of a buffoon like me, a shameless buffoon? I beg Your Majesty to excuse me.

BIJJALA (*calls*). Kallappa! (*To BASAVANNA*) Are you going home?

BASAVANNA. No, sir. I've distressing news from Maddur. If I leave now, I may reach by sun-down.

BIJJALA. Oh, yes! Some of your young followers have got into a fight with the Jains there, haven't they? Good. You'll have a restraining influence on them. Situations rarely seem to improve when left to my officers.

BASAVANNA. I shall look to it, Your Majesty. Along the way

I want to call on Jagadeva and his mother. I was in the Treasury when his father died—

BIJJALA (*ignoring the last remark*). Kallappa, have a pair of guards ready to accompany Basavanna—

BASAVANNA. I need no escort, sir.

BIJJALA. The throngs outside are bursting with the delirium of bhakti. I don't want any more miracles right now, thank you.

BASAVANNA (*bows*). Sharan, Your Majesty.

BIJJALA. Good-bye.

BASAVANNA *leaves along with KALLAPPA. A long pause.*

MANCHANNA. You can't blame the Yuvaraj, sir. Not if you've seen the goings-on in Basavanna's house. Food for all the devotees that flock there day and night. Gifts. Clothes. How can he afford such lavish hospitality? His affluence is a source of dismay to the whole city.

BIJJALA. I'm happy to know my son is not alone in his stupidity. With a hundred and ninety-six thousand *sharanas* resident in the city, do you think I would choose to remain ignorant of their finances? I can account for every penny spent in that house.

MANCHANNA KRAMITA *tries to hide his astonishment.*

I came to this city ten years ago and I brought Basavanna with me as my Treasurer. Along with him came the *sharanas*, each one convinced that work is worship, that his work is no mere profession but a calling.

Every *sharana* seeks only to earn the day's keep, makes no extra demands, treats profits with contempt. So who benefits? From every corner of the country, trade and commerce have come pouring into Kalyan, and now the city is bursting at its seams with money and activity. Even those who despise the *sharanas* for their beliefs need them for their economic enterprise—as indeed I do—and so they pour money into the *sharana* coffers. Basavanna does not

need to defraud me! If only my idiot son had asked me first—(*calls out.*) Kallappa! Has the mob thinned? It's time we proceeded to the audience hall.

KALLAPPA (*enters*). Thinned, Master? Vanished is more like it. They've all followed Basavanna out. There isn't a soul left behind to swat a fly!

Scene Four

The Brahmin quarter of Kalyan. SAMBASHIVA SHASTRI's house. The post-funeral rituals are going on. The mantras can be heard. BASAVANNA and KAKKAYYA enter the street in front of the house, followed by a noisy crowd, mostly consisting of men and children. BASAVANNA stops, turns, folds his hands before the crowd.

BASAVANNA. I beg of you. Don't follow me around like this. There was no miracle in the Treasury. Don't shame me with this wanton talk of God's miracles!

MAN. There are those who saw with their own eyes—and you deny it? Not ten but fifty thousand witnesses swear to it—

MAN 2. How many miracles have you performed so far, Basavanna?

BASAVANNA. How many shall I say? Will eighty-eight do?

Showing off my eighty-eight miracles
my bhakti has become
a carnival wardrobe.

It's in such tatters, I can't find a patch large enough to hide my shame.

CROWD (*shouts*). Basava is Shiva! Shiva is Basava! Victory to Saint Basavanna! Glory to the Treasurer of Faith!

BASAVANNA *stands, non-plussed*.

KAKKAYYA. You go on, Basavanna. I'll stop them here. (*To the crowds.*) You stay here with me. Stand back!

BASAVANNA. Thank you, Kakkayya.

BASAVANNA enters the house. Some members of the family, who had collected at the door to watch the crowds, disperse hurriedly when they see BASAVANNA come in. No one greets him. He sits quietly in a corner. AMBA comes in. Long pause.

BASAVANNA. I heard of his illness in Bannoor. I hoped to call on him as soon as I returned to Kalyan, but there was this business at the Treasury. Never got to see him again. God's will.

AMBA. You used to come often once, with my husband. But you haven't been here in a long while. You've become a big man.

BASAVANNA. What am I to say, Ambakka?

AMBA. People are under your spell. They say Lord Shiva performs miracles for you. That's good. God did nothing for us in this house—not that we are worthy of it!

She starts crying.

BASAVANNA. Why the tears, Ambakka? You have your son Jagadeva—

AMBA. Yes, he is there. But will he stay? Why have you come here, Basavanna? I have this cold fear in the pit of my stomach . . . why have you come? My son is home again. He has brought his wife back. There are signs that he may settle down again to a normal life. But to accomplish this his father had to give up his life. Have you come to take him away again? Let today's ceremony be over. Let the house be cleansed to set up life again. Then do as you wish.

BASAVANNA. Do you want me to go away?

A side door opens and the Head Priest enters.

PRIEST. The Brahmins have received their parting fee and are ready to leave. No one may remain here.

AMBA hurries out. BASAVANNA doesn't move.

The rites are over. The Brahmin who has invoked the departed spirit on himself is about to leave. No outsider may see him. It's a bad omen.

BASAVANNA. Omens don't bother me.

PRIEST. As you wish.

He peeps into the room.

Please, come.

Three Brahmins step out, followed by JAGADEVA, who is now clean-shaven and wears a sacred thread. He is startled to see BASAVANNA. The Head Priest signals one of the Brahmins to go out by the back door. He does so.

PRIEST. Jagadeva, go, sweep the floor after him and apply cowdung, so the ground he's stepped on is purified again.

Commotion outside. Shouts of 'Basavanna!' 'Victory to the Treasurer of Faith!' are heard. BASAVANNA turns to go out.

JAGADEVA. Sit, Basavanna. Don't go. I'll be back—

JAGADEVA goes out by the back door.

PRIEST (*to BASAVANNA*). Rituals for the departed are being performed in this house. Couldn't you find a different venue for your antics?

The Priest and the Brahmins depart. JAGADEVA enters hurriedly. Long pause.

JAGADEVA. Are you angry with me—that I should have reverted to my caste? This sacred thread—these rites—

BASAVANNA. No.

JAGADEVA. Then perhaps you find it comic—this Brahmanical farce—

BASAVANNA. What I feel is beside the point.

JAGADEVA. I had to do it. For my mother's peace of mind.

Pause.

Father kept calling out for me in the last few days of his life. His throat gave out but I didn't come. Now, these last eleven days I have been seeking him, invoking him limb by limb on two absurd little pebbles. I am calling out to him, now that he's gone! Isn't that just like me?

Pause.

Just like my father too. For all his fire sacrifices, penance and meditations, when it came to facing death he couldn't take it. He was afraid. He used to weep with fear. Do you think my life too will be like that? A tale of fear, defeat, futility?

BASAVANNA. It needs courage to accept that one is afraid. To be able to say 'This fear of mine —This is my truth now'—that may be the ultimate triumph.

Commotion outside. The crowds are getting more riotous. BASAVANNA makes a move to go.

JAGADEVA. Where are you going?

BASAVANNA. They won't leave you in peace while I stay here. Besides, I must reach Maddur before dark.

JAGADEVA. I have to talk to you, Basavanna. I have so much to discuss. Must you go to Maddur today?

BASAVANNA. Yes, some of our people have occupied a Jain temple there by force. They are threatening to smash the naked idols in it and turn it into a Shiva temple. Things could go out of hand—

JAGADEVA. And what will you do once you get there? I know. Rebuke our own people. Hold them responsible. You don't know how the Jains bait us, provoke us—

BASAVANNA. Violence is wrong, whatever the provocation. To resort to it because someone else started it first is even worse. And to do so in the name of a structure of brick and mortar is a monument to stupidity.

The rich
will make temples for Shiva.
What shall I,
a poor man,
do?

My legs are pillars,
the body the shrine,
the head a cupola
of gold.

Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,
things standing shall fall,
but the moving shall ever stay.

JAGADEVA. Haven't you heard? In Ablur, Ramayya, the Solitary Saint, led the attack on a Jain temple. He threw the non-believers out and established his rights to their temple by performing a miracle. His head flew around like a pigeon—

BASAVANNA. Isn't this life abundant enough? Do we need more miracles?

JAGADEVA (*suddenly*). There was no miracle in the Treasury.

BASAVANNA. No, there wasn't. I know that.

JAGADEVA. So long as I was there, there was not a whisper of it.

BASAVANNA. It's sad, but even among the *sharanas* there's no shortage of credulity.

Pause.

JAGADEVA. Tell me. Who started this rumour about a miracle? Was it you?

Pause.

BASAVANNA. Since you ask, you must think so.

JAGADEVA (*excited*). I led the march to the Treasury. Here my father was breathing his last. My mother, alone and helpless, was banging her head against the wall. And I was at the Treasury! You know why? To make sure that Basavanna's honour remained untarnished. To establish his glory in perpetuity. That's why! Tomorrow I shall be the talk of the town, I told myself. I shall be the hero of the *sharanas*. I could see myself taken out in procession, hoisted on the shoulders of my friends and companions! And what happened? I came home. For eleven days I immersed myself in these death rituals. And this morning, as I emerged from them, I was told—Basavanna has performed a miracle. Basavanna! No mention of me. In front of my own house, only hosannas to Basavanna!

BASAVANNA. I too have been performing rituals of sorts these last eleven days. (*Pause.*) All this glory!

My men in their love for me,
with praise and more praise,
have impaled me on a stake of gold!

JAGADEVA. Everyone my father trusted let him down. The King, you, I, even God. Finally, there was nothing left for him but to shed tears. Do you know how a man crumbles when he loses power? In the service of the court, Father was tall and imposing and walked with long, confident strides. Weighed each word before parting with it. But the moment Bijjala threw him out, he shrank, like a piece of soaked cloth. Even his voice went shrill. It was loathesome—

BASAVANNA (*gently*). You must not judge too easily.

Pause.

I have just left the King's service myself.

JAGADEVA looks at him in astonishment. Then slowly.

JAGADEVA. Do you know what you are? You are a manipulator. A clever, conniving trickster.

BASAVANNA (*pained*). Why do you say that?

JAGADEVA. Father had seen through you. 'Don't trust Basavanna', he would say, 'He's an impostor—'

BASAVANNA. I'm sorry. But I don't believe your father would ever say that.

JAGADEVA. Do you mean . . . I'm lying?

BASAVANNA. Yes, you are. But why?

JAGADEVA. You and I must have been enemies through the last seven births. That's why, no matter what I say, you can still make me feel small. You turn me into a worm in the eyes of the people.

Commotion outside. The Chief Priest enters.

PRIEST. If you don't leave now, they'll break in. Please—

JAGADEVA. Look, I'm here to worry about that. Why don't you keep out of it?

PRIEST. Your mother asked me. So . . .

He goes out.

BASAVANNA (*gets up*). I'd better go.

JAGADEVA. Don't, Basavanna. Please. Who's there to talk to if you go? Who else will even have an inkling here of what I'm saying? Perhaps I'm stupid. Perhaps you have cast one of your spells on me. But there's no one left for me but you.

BASAVANNA. Come here. Shut your eyes.

JAGADEVA does as told. BASAVANNA places his palm on his head.

Repeat after me: *Om namah Shivāya.*

JAGADEVA repeats the words. This is done three times. Then BASAVANNA withdraws his hand.

JAGADEVA. You torment me till my heart screams murder.

Then to be soothed back to sleep, who do I need but you?

BASAVANNA. No one is on his own. The Lord has tied us to one another with bonds beyond our comprehension. I'll tell you something—something I have not breathed to anybody else. One night the mystic Allama and I were sitting talking late into the night. He is one of the few I know to have attained a state of grace. So I asked him: 'What is this I? How do I recognize it?' And Allama replied: 'I'll show you. Watch.' And right there, even as I was watching, his whole life poured out of his body.

Pause.

Like shadow puppets, row after endless row. His birth. Childhood. His youth in Banavasi. His lust for the dancer Kamalata. Her death. The linga he found on the palm of a buried skeleton. A procession of events. A pantomime in which I even saw myself and my associates. Everything. Not just the ordinary or the simple or the holy or the beautiful. Along with that, the grotesque and the evil. Filth beyond belief. As though a river full of spring blossoms also carried decaying flesh, rotten limbs, uprooted hair, a flood of pus—the stench interwoven with the fragrance. I couldn't bear it. 'No, this is not you, Great Saint', I cried out. He smiled and said: 'You are watching, aren't you?' Then there was, suddenly, a point when I was so overwhelmed by the beauty and the horror that I shut my eyes for a moment. When I opened them, he was there but fast asleep. We didn't talk about it the next day—or ever again. Even now, as I think of it, I can feel myself shiver.

JAGADEVA. Why are you telling me all this?

BASAVANNA. I don't know. Just felt like telling you. I don't know why Allama treated me to that vision either.

Stones crash on the roof. There is a roar from the crowd outside.

Shouts of 'Basavanna, come out!' 'Darshan!' 'Darshan!' are heard. AMBA enters.

AMBA. Spare us, Basavanna. Your devotees are throwing stones for you—

BASAVANNA (*gets up*). I did not mean to trouble you. But I seem to have succeeded in doing just that. (*Smiles.*) My life seems to have become one long apology.

He says 'Sharan' and goes out. The crowd surrounds him with enthusiasm, follows him out. JAGADEVA, AMBA, SAVITRI and the Head Priest watch.

PRIEST (*relieved*). Well, the rest is easily attended to. Nothing utilized in today's rituals may be put to use again. Not the wood, not the pots, not the left-overs. Burn what you can. Consign the rest to the river. Everything should be disposed of.

JAGADEVA. But I too was used in the rituals. So what do I do with myself?

ACT TWO

Scene Five

*Basavanna's house. He is with two sharana youths—
KALAYYA and GUNDANNA. KAKKAYYA, the untouch-
able saint, who is in his seventies, is sitting near by.*

BASAVANNA (*angry*). Shall I come in person then and tell him?

GUNDANNA (*laughs*). That will be hurling a thunderbolt at a sparrow. He isn't a bad fellow, really, that officer! Someone has been setting him up—

BASAVANNA. There's such a thing as common humanity!

KALAYYA. Basavanna, these tribals have brought their god with them. You should see that idol. Rolling eyes. A tongue lolling out. It's very funny.

GUNDANNA (*laughs*). I think—the sooner you initiate them into our fold the better!

BASAVANNA. A roof over their head first, and a piece of land to spread their mats on. We can minister to their spiritual needs later.

GUNDANNA. All right. We'll keep you informed.

While the above conversation is going on, a group of visitors enters: MADHUVARASA, a Brahmin by birth, with his wife LALITAMBA, and daughter KALAVATI, aged about twelve; HARALAYYA, a cobbler by birth, along with his wife KALYANI and son SHEELAVANTA, of about fifteen years; their friends. They are led in by GANGAMBIKA, wife of BASAVANNA.

They all greet each other with 'Sharan, Basavanna', 'Sharan, Kakkayya', etc.

GANGAMBIKA. Gundanna, I have kept a few bags of paddy, lentils, salt and spices for them in the room outside. Pick them up on your way out.

GUNDANNA. Yes, Gangakka.

BASAVANNA (*restless*). I really ought to go with you now. But I'm expecting Kukke Shetty, the trader. If I finish with him soon, I'll follow. Otherwise I'll be there the first thing tomorrow morning.

KALAYYA. That may not be necessary though. *Sharan.*

GUNDANNA and KALAYYA *exit*.

HARALAYYA. Is that about the refugees from Andhra, Gangakka? They say a band of tribal shepherds is camping on the riverside.

BASAVANNA. There's famine raging in Andhra. These poor souls have trekked for weeks in search of food and shelter. But our people won't let them stray this side of the river because of their low caste. I tell you, for sheer inhumanity our people have no equal.

MADHUVARASA. Had you been the Treasurer to the King now, a thing like that wouldn't have taken a moment! But our *sharanas* mocked you then, for serving a worldly King.

BASAVANNA *shrugs vaguely, goes to the door and looks out*.

GANGAMBIKA. Are you expecting someone?

BASAVANNA. Some dispute in Kukke Shetty's family. They want me to adjudicate.

GANGAMBIKA. They aren't here yet. So you might at least talk to those who are!

BASAVANNA (*abashed, to the visitors*). Oh! Oh! So you're here to see me? (*Explaining*.) You see what it is. I have a formula. If a visitor wears a smile on his face as he approaches this house, he's here to see my wife. If he's scowling, he's here to see me.

GANGAMBIKA (*blushing*). Enough now!

BASAVANNA. All of you seemed so happy, I naturally assumed—

He notices that they are dressed up.

Well, now! What's on! Some festival? New sarees, new

turbans. You look grand. Is it some special occasion? But Lalitakka, you don't look too happy—

MADHUVARASA (*laughs*). Heh! Heh! Isn't it to be expected that a mother will feel a little upset at the prospect of her daughter's wedding?

BASAVANNA (*excited*). Truly? So Kalavati is getting married, is she? Did you hear that, Ganga?

GANGAMBIKA. They just told me. I'm so happy—

MADHUVARASA. We have the engagement ceremony tomorrow evening. You must all come. Kakkayya, you too—

BASAVANNA. Of course, we'll be there. (*To GANGAMBIKA.*) Just think—that little girl who was toddling around only the other day now at the threshold of life! I feel my bones creaking.

Laughter all round.

KALYANI. Go on, Sheela, touch their feet. Don't stand there like a wax doll—

HARALAYYA. He's grown into a proper buffaloe. Still needs to be told everything.

SHEELAVANTA *touches* BASAVANNA's feet.

We expect you at the betrothal tomorrow, Basavanna.

BASAVANNA. God be praised! There must be some extraordinary conjunction of stars tomorrow. Two betrothals on the same day!

Laughter.

GANGAMBIKA. You're the limit! Where are you? There's only one betrothal.

KALYANI. It's been decided to bring Kalavati for our Sheela. Bless them, Basavanna—

BASAVANNA. What's that?

His eyes suddenly fill with tears. He cannot speak. KAKKAYYA looks stunned, uncomprehending. A long, strange silence. Then MADHUVARASA starts, with great deliberation.

MADHUVARASA. Naturally, we are gratified to notice that even you are taken by surprise. It's evident you did not anticipate that your efforts would bear fruit so soon—

GANGAMBIKA. Sheelavanta is waiting for your blessings.

BASAVANNA (*with a start*). Bless you! Bless you! Our good wishes are always with you. You must seek the blessings of elders—

BASAVANNA gestures towards KAKKAYYA. SHEELAVANTA touches KAKKAYYA's feet. BASAVANNA relapses into silence. A strange anxiety fills the room. HARALAYYA's face reddens; he turns to his wife, perplexed but also angry.

MADHUVARASA (*clears his throat*). We came here secure in our belief that you would welcome this alliance with joy. Instead, we see you both startled—even troubled.

HARALAYYA. Your hand wouldn't even bless the boy!

KAKKAYYA (*slowly, gently*). You know my profession is tanning. In terms of 'caste', that's low, even lower than you, Haralayya. When one grows up that far down, there's nothing one doesn't know about the horror of caste. So I ask you: have you given this alliance enough thought?

MADHUVARASA. How can you even ask? Kalavati is our only daughter, Sheelavanta their only son—

KALYANI (*looking at her husband for support*). We have given enough thought to the wedding arrangements, Kakkayya. A *sharana* boy marries a *sharana* girl. No need for much fuss there, is there?

Pause.

But if you're going to see it as a Brahmin girl marrying a cobbler's son—well, we don't know how to answer you.

GANGAMBIKA. Sister, you know my husband would never think like that! It's not like him—

KALYANI. Who knows what thoughts will strike whom at what time.

KAKKAYYA. We are all *sharanas*. We have surrendered ourselves

to Lord Shiva. There is no caste among *sharanas*, neither Brahmin nor cobbler. This alliance is a cause for celebration. And yet—

MADHUVARASA. Yes?

KAKKAYYA. The worldly surround us. Will they take kindly to it? Will they accept?

HARALAYYA. What do they have to do with this wedding?

MADHUVARASA. Should we care if the ignorant scream their heads off? Should it affect us? Why should I sneer at others, Kakkayya? Till the other day, even I mocked the *sharanas*, ridiculed them at the slightest pretext. And then one day, enlightenment dawned. It'll happen to others too. You'll see.

KAKKAYYA. And will they sit patiently until then?

HARALAYYA. They'd better. We'll see to it that they do.

BASAVANNA. Until now it was only a matter of theoretical speculation. But this—this is real. The orthodox will see this mingling of castes as a blow at the very roots of varnashrama dharma. Bigotry has not faced such a challenge in two thousand years. I need hardly describe what venom will gush out, what hatred will erupt once the news spreads.

MADHUVARASA. So be it. Like Lord Shiva himself, we shall drink that venom and hold it blocked in our throats!

BASAVANNA (*angry*). This is no time for pretty speeches! It's a question of life and death for these children. From tomorrow the wrath of the bigoted will pursue them like a swarm of snakes, to strike as they pause to put up a roof or light an oven. Who will protect them then? Elementary prudence demands that—

HARALAYYA. So you don't approve of this marriage! I knew it, Kalyani. So what if it's the saintly Basavanna or the revered elder Kakkayya? Let a cobbler rub shoulders with a Brahmin and the *sharanas* will be the first to object.

BASAVANNA. Some day this entire edifice of caste and creed, this poison-house of varnashrama, will come tumbling

down. Every person will see himself only as a human being. As a bhakta. As a *sharana*. That is inevitable. But we have a long way to go. You know the most terrible crimes have been justified in the name of sanatana religion.

MADHUVARASA. Then let me say this: I shall not hesitate to sacrifice my daughter's life to forward the cause of our great movement.

KAKKAYYA (*horrified*). Madhuvarasa!

BASAVANNA. No one has a right to sacrifice anyone—not even himself.

HARALAYYA (*to MADHUVARASA*). The word 'sacrifice' strikes terror in me. Too long have my people sacrificed our women to the greed of the upper castes, our sons to their cosmic theories of rebirth. No more sacrifices, please.

Long silence.

KAKKAYYA. What does Sheela say?

HARALAYYA (*surprised*). What can he say? He'll do as told.

KALYANI. He's still wet behind the ears. What does he know?

KAKKAYYA. But *he* has to face the ordeal.

He turns to SHEELAVANTA.

So, Sheela, what do you say? Is this alliance acceptable to you?

SHEELAVANTA *looks at his parents, perplexed.*

Don't look at them. Look at me—

SHEELAVANTA. I—I—

GANGAMBIKA (*to KALAVATI*). You and your friends should go out and play in the garden. We'll send for you.

KALAVATI *and friends run out.*

BASAVANNA. Yes, Sheelavanta?

SHEELAVANTA. I don't want the marriage.

HARALAYYA. Are you in your senses, you—

KAKKAYYA (*silences everyone*). Why? Don't you like Kalavati?

SHEELAVANTA. Ayyo, Shiva-Shiva! It isn't at all like that. She is—like a flower, I swear. Poor thing.

KAKKAYYA. Then why?

SHEELAVANTA. I have told my parents . . .

KAKKAYYA. Tell us too. Why are you afraid?

SHEELAVANTA (*tearful*). I don't want to hurt her. Don't want to ruin her life. They'll tease her tomorrow, call her a 'cobbler's priestess'.

KAKKAYYA. Who will?

SHEELAVANTA. The children. In our own neighbourhood.

KAKKAYYA. *Sharana* children?

SHEELAVANTA. Yes, sir. Besides—I'm not willing to give up my father's calling. What's wrong with stitching footwear?

BASAVANNA. Is anyone asking you to give up your ancestral calling, Sheelavanta?

SHEELAVANTA (*scared*). No, sir, no one. But—Kalavati can't stand the smell of leather. I've seen her. Whenever she passes a cobbler's shop she holds her nose. Will she spend her whole life like that?

LALITA (*bursts out*). I have been silent all along. I can't be any longer. Sheela is a gem. You won't find another boy like him in all the Brahmin areas! But what he says is true.

BASAVANNA. Yes?

LALITA. Till the other day our daughter ran around barefoot. She was told it was unclean to touch any leather except deer-skin. How can she start skinning dead buffaloes tomorrow? Or tan leather?

There is a sudden chill in the air.

KALYANI (*tense*). Lalitakka, we are cobblers. Not skimmers or tanners.

HARALAYYA (*explains*). The *holeyas* skin the carcass. The *madi-gas* and the *dohas* tan the hide. Only then does it come to us.

MADHUVARASA. Please, I beg of you, don't take umbrage. All this is rather unfamiliar territory to us. All these details.

I'm afraid she doesn't know what she's saying. (*To LALITA*). Can't you hold your tongue?

LALITA. It's my child's life! She gets a splitting headache if she so much as smells burning camphor. She is so . . . so . . . tender.

She bursts into tears.

Each time she returns from the cobblers' street, she throws up and takes to bed.

MADHUVARASA (*thundering*). Woman, I said hold your tongue. You are insulting a *sharana's* calling . . .

HARALAYYA. No, Madhuvarasa, it doesn't upset me. My wife and I became *sharanas*, gave up meat and alcohol, and our ancient gods. Now when our children ask us: 'Why then are we still stitching the same old scraps of leather?' what can I answer? If my son decides to change his vocation, will the weavers accept him? Will the potters open their ranks?

LALITA. I'm sorry, Haralanna. May I tell them—about your mother?

MADHUVARASA. His mother? What about his mother? I've never seen her—

LALITA. Every full moon night, Goddess Dyamavva of the Banyan Tree speaks. Through his mother.

MADHUVARASA (*scandalized*). How do you know that?

LALITA (*defiantly*). Because I am a devotee of the goddess! I know Basavanna forbids it as blind superstition, but I am!

HARALAYYA. We became *sharanas*. But Mother refused to do so. She wept and cried that she could not forsake our family gods. So we parted. I haven't seen her since. She hasn't looked at us.

LALITA. At the last full-moon fair, she prophesied—

KALYANI (*tense*). We don't believe in all that. I don't. Nor does my husband.

BASAVANNA. What was the prophecy?

LALITA. Rivers of blood will flow if the marriage takes place,

she said, human limbs will rot in the streets. This is not any stranger—this is Sheela's own grandmother speaking! MADHUVARASA (*incensed*). First you go and attend those daemonic rituals in secret. Then you have the gall to make an exhibition of yourself. Keep quiet, or I'll give you a thrashing.

GANGAMBIKA. Shame on you, Madhuvanna. Women and cattle, they are all the same to you, aren't they?

LALITA (*bitterly*). What is a daemonic ritual and what isn't? Don't call me a termagant for railing against my own husband, Gangakka. But ten years ago he found a Pashupata Guru. For months he immersed himself in ash, shouted loudly and danced. And the family had to put up with it. Then one day he discovered the Buddha. Wanted to give away all our worldly possessions to a monastery, until I threatened to jump into a well. And now, forgive me, he is a *sharana*. And that's all that counts. The others aren't worthy of a second thought—

MADHUVARASA (*distressed*). But I have done it all in good faith, Lalita. Grant me at least my good faith!

LALITA. Such faith! Our initiation as *sharanas* was not even complete when he saw Sheelavanta and decided he was right for our daughter. But if Sheela had been a Brahmin boy, he wouldn't even have sniffed at him.

HARALAYYA. You are honest, sister—frighteningly honest. So I must tell you. When your husband proposed this alliance to me, my first thought was: 'I wasn't even allowed to dream of upper-caste girls. Now this one falls right into my son's lap!'

GANGAMBIKA. A woman is just a ripe mango on a roadside tree for all of you, isn't she? One more challenge to your manhood!

A group of sharanas enters. They all greet each other. 'Sharan', 'Sharan', etc. Much embracing and loud exchange of congratulations.

SHARANA ONE. The whole city is abuzz with your news.

KAKKAYYA. Oh! So the news has spread, has it?

SHARANA TWO. What do you mean? Every *sharana* home is wearing a festive air already. You've done it!

SHARANA THREE. The Brahmins are in a state of uproar. All credit to you!

SHARANA FOUR. Excellent! Excellent!

As the rest of the scene progresses, the hall fills up. Small groups of men and women come in, all excited, congratulating each other and joining in the debate.

SHARANA THREE. Just a small question, Basavanna, if you don't mind.

SHARANA TWO. You see, we heard the news and were thrilled. We knew the two families had come here to touch your feet. So we waited for them in Goolappa's shop. (*Pause.*) And they didn't come back!

SHARANA ONE. Evidently there's been a great deal of discussion.

SHARANA THREE. I wish you'd sent for us too.

KAKKAYYA. It wasn't really a meeting. They sought our blessings—

SHARANA FOUR. Precisely. That's what we heard. And—(*Pause.*)—apparently Basavanna wouldn't bless them.

HARALAYYA. Who told you that?

MADHUVARASA. No, no, that's unfair.

SHARANA FOUR. Unfair? I'm only asking a question.

HARALAYYA. Of course, he blessed them.

BASAVANNA. But I hesitated. I was—tardy.

Surprise all around.

MADHUVARASA. Anyway, all that's over and done with.

SHARANA THREE. What's done with? Why should a blessing be a problem?

BASAVANNA. I'll tell you. My immediate response was one of joy. Didn't know whether to laugh or cry. All that we'd

prayed for, all that we had sought, it was there in an instant by God's grace. And yet my heart trembled.

KAKKAYYA. I too was afraid.

SHARANA ONE. Is that why you said there should be an enquiry?

BASAVANNA. Not an enquiry. (*Smiles.*) Just a bit of thinking.

SHARANA TWO. And what did you think?

SHARANA ONE. What are you afraid of, Basavanna?

BASAVANNA. We are not ready for the kind of revolution this wedding is. We haven't worked long enough or hard enough!

SHARANA THREE. So how many more generations have to roll by before a cobbler marries a Brahmin?

SHARANA FIVE. Do we mean generations? or heads?

SHARANA FOUR (*incredulous*). You mean this marriage won't take place?

SHARANA SIX (*excited*). All these years you have been teaching us that caste and creed are phantoms. And now that people here are willing to act on your precepts, you want to turn tail? What will the world say?

SHARANA THREE. We *sharanas* will become the laughing stock of the world!

BASAVANNA. What the world thinks is immaterial. It is a question of living, breathing human beings. A question of *that* boy's life, *that* girl's safety. What matters is what *we* consider right.

SHARANA FIVE. You're a saint, a mystic, a seer. From your heights this world must look as insignificant as grass. But I have to face the orthodox tomorrow. I have to bear their jests—

SHARANA TWO. Shall I suggest something? Let the entire congregation of *sharanas* meet tomorrow. Let's thrash the problem out.

SHARANA FOUR. That's right. There aren't enough of us here today. So tomorrow we—

BASAVANNA. No!

The sharanas are startled by his vehemence.

SHARANA TWO. Why not?

SHARANA ONE. You don't want to hear what the rest of us have to say? Our own brethren—

BASAVANNA. An alliance is a matter to be settled by those involved in it. Our opinion was asked. We offered it. The rest is up to the families of Haralayya and Madhuvarasa. It would be unpardonable if other pressures are brought to bear upon them.

FEMALE SHARANA. All right then. Let Haralayya answer a small doubt. Naturally he jumped at the prospect of a fair Brahmin daughter-in-law. Would he be as keen on a girl from a caste lower than his?

A group of boys comes running in. There's excitement. 'The King?' 'Oh, my God!' 'This is serious', etc. Everyone hurriedly stands up.

KALLAPPA *strides in, casts a cool, professional look around.*
BIJJALA *follows.*

The sharanas bow. BIJJALA acknowledges the greetings.

BASAVANNA. My house is honoured by the visit. And yet Your Majesty had only to send word and—

BIJJALA. You are not an officer of the court any more. And I wasn't sure my invitation would register in the delirium of communal oneness.

The sharanas titter obediently.

I want to talk to you.

BASAVANNA. We are all *sharanas* here. We have no secrets from each other.

BIJJALA. You, men of God, are truly fortunate. We kings, however, belong to the secular world. (*Pointedly.*) We are not so fortunate.

SHARANAS (*taking the hint*). It's time for the evening prayers. It's almost sun-down . . .

They disperse. BASAVANNA excuses himself to the KING and accompanies the sharanas to the door. GANGAMBIKA, seeing that the KING is alone, walks across to him.

GANGAMBIKA. I hope the Queen is well?

BIJJALA. What can one say? The various treatments go on. She seems to improve for a while. Then we are back again.

LALITA, *avoiding her husband, rushes to BASAVANNA at the door.*

LALITA (*pleading*). So what have you decided, Basavanna? I have nothing against Sheelavanta. But—his profession—can't he—can he change it?

MADHUVARASA and HARALAYYA *join them.*

HARALAYYA. I know I only have to stop this wedding and many people will heave a sigh of relief. You, also Lalitakka, Kakkayya—

LALITA. No, it's not that—

MADHUVARASA. God forbid!

HARALAYYA. But, Basavanna, you gave us hope. You told us it was possible to escape from the coils of caste. We have been snarled up in them too long. Now I am ready to face the consequences—

BASAVANNA. Promise me one thing.

HARALAYYA. Yes?

BASAVANNA. The moment the wedding is over, send the young couple away. Somewhere far away.

MADHUVARASA. But—our daughter isn't a woman yet. To send her with her husband now—

BASAVANNA. If possible, you too go with them. Excuse me. The King waits . . .

HARALAYYA (*dubious*). All right.

The hall has emptied. BASAVANNA returns to the KING, who chats with GANGAMBIKA.

GANGAMBIKA. Let me bring a drink for you, Your Majesty.

BIJJALA. Nothing now, thank you.

GANGAMBIKA. This is Your Majesty's first visit to our house. You must accept a little refreshment.

She goes in.

BIJJALA (*looking around*). You know how it's in the palace. Ears—ears everywhere. And often eyes along with them. I hope you are less exposed.

BASAVANNA. Our doors, sir, are wide open.

BIJJALA. Good. Well then. I was on my way home from the court when who should confront me but a horde of howling Brahmins. It is true that normally a Brahmin does not wail or beat his breast while mourning. But let me tell you, when he sets his mind to it, no other caste can match him in that art!

BASAVANNA. What were they mourning, sir?

BIJJALA (*ignoring him*). I was tempted to rush here direct, to check if you hadn't gone off your head. But then came the next bit of news. Basavanna had refused to bless the couple, so the alliance was off. Reassuring, I thought, but one can never be certain of these *sharanas*. Let me go and confirm for myself. That's why I'm here.

BASAVANNA. Your Majesty, a *sharana* called Madhuvarasa has offered his daughter in marriage to the son of another *sharana* called Haralayya. I saw no reason to interfere. And I didn't.

BIJJALA. Of course, you didn't. How could you? After all these years of condemning the caste system, you could hardly oppose an inter-caste marriage now. That's perfectly understandable. You just held your hand back. The blessing was not completed. The wedding was called off. Correct?

BASAVANNA. I am not in charge of this wedding, sir.

BIJJALA (*a little rough*). I only hope the wedding's off. That's all I have come to hear.

BASAVANNA. It's not off as far as I know.

BIJJALA turns on him.

BIJJALA (*softly*). This isn't you. Surely you aren't such a dim-wit? So I can only presume that after fifteen years of being led by you, your disciples are now refusing to do your bidding.

BASAVANNA. I have no disciples, sir. No one is obliged to take my advice.

BIJJALA. Well then, I shall have to do what you evidently can't do. I shall forbid the match.

BASAVANNA (*in horror*). Sir, but that—

BIJJALA. You know perfectly well the higher castes will not take this lying down. The wedding pandal will turn into a slaughter-house. The streets of Kalyan will reek of human entrails.

BASAVANNA. But who is being punished for whose crime? Are the birds to be penalized because snakes resent their ability to fly?

BIJJALA. This cursed wedding shall not take place! Do you understand? This is an order. I am not willing to discuss the matter any further.

BASAVANNA. In that event, Your Majesty, I shall go to the palace, right now, sit in the grounds there and keep on sitting till such time as the prohibition is withdrawn.

BIJJALA. Sit away! And why go alone? Take your whole congregation with you for company. You think I give a damn?

BASAVANNA (*gently*). I shall not ask anyone to come with me, sir. But they may, on their own, decide to do so.

BIJJALA. What do you mean by that?

Stares at BASAVANNA. Then—

Of course, that's exactly what will happen, won't it? The entire herd of *sharanas* will follow you. A simple thing like the Treasury brought tens of thousands of them out. Won't the palace bring out a hundred thousand? You are a sly fox, I admit it. A hundred and ninety-six thousand *sharanas*! They only have to lay down their implements. And market after market in the city will close down. Streets will fall

empty. Trade will collapse, the economy suffer a set-back. The question then is: will my citizens accept such losses on account of an absurd wedding? Will any jack-ass of a king agree to place himself willingly in such a mess? And would even the biggest dunderhead in the kingdom have failed to foresee this course of events after serving for sixteen years as the King's Treasurer?

Shouting.

But let me warn you, Basavanna, if you think I have ascended the throne merely to sit back and scratch my arse you are in for a surprise. After sixteen years, how little you know me! You and those *sharanas* of yours! Just because the city of Kalyan has fallen into your hands, you think you can twist my arms behind my back and push me around with impunity? I am Bijjala! Know that and be on your guard. If you insist on driving me to the limits of patience, I shall stamp all of you out like a cushionful of bed-bugs!

While he rants, GANGAMBIKA comes out with a pitcher of cool drink and three cups. BIJJALA has seen her but ignored her entirely. She calmly starts filling the cups. Then, when he stops for breath.

GANGAMBIKA (*to BASAVANNA*). Shall I bring the medicine?

BASAVANNA. Eh?

GANGAMBIKA. The medicine?

BASAVANNA. What medicine?

GANGAMBIKA. For you ears. If His Majesty needs to shout even in this small house, perhaps your ears need attention.

BASAVANNA laughs. BIJJALA doesn't, but glares at her balefully. Then in a hoarse whisper.

BIJJALA. Basavanna, I can take on the whole lot of you *sharanas* single-handed. But I swear, your women confound me!

GANGAMBIKA (*laughing as she places a cup in front of him*). Here, sir.

Also places cups in front of KALLAPPA and BASAVANNA, and goes out. BIJJALA shouts after her.

BIJJALA. And listen, sister. Wherever I go, before I even sip a drop, I pour a little down Kallappa's throat to check if he won't go into convulsions and die like a sick dog. But, today, in your house, I go first—

GANGAMBIKA. Let me fetch you some more then.

She exits. BIJJALA tosses the drink down his throat and turns to BASAVANNA.

BIJJALA. If you and those Brahmins are bent on self-destruction, go ahead. I wish you luck. I shall take my army away and entertain myself with a little warfare. When you are done, I shall return home to count your corpses.

BASAVANNA. Sir, until this day we have accepted Kalyan as our mother city. But if the *sharanas* are not to expect basic security in this land, I beg you to tell us so. We shan't bother you any further. We shall move on.

BIJJALA. Where?

BASAVANNA. Lord Shiva led us here. He'll take us to some other place. This is not a threat, Your Majesty. I speak from my heart.

BIJJALA. And you really believe your herd of a hundred and ninety-six thousand will give up home and shelter and follow you again into the wilderness?

BASAVANNA. That's for each one to decide for himself. Nevertheless, perhaps we *sharanas* have been inert too long—tempted by the comforts of Kalyan. Perhaps we should take this as a sign and move!

A long pause.

BIJJALA. So be it. Have your wedding. I won't come in the way. Because I know I can't. You have trussed me up so I can't squirm an inch. But, Basavanna, once again you have brought home to me what I have always known: that you are the most selfish person I've ever met. Nothing

matters to you—not friendship, not loyalty, not love—nothing except your society of *sharanas*. So our ways part here. I can only suggest that from now on you *sharanas* maintain your distance from me. You know I can be unpleasant. No need to add anything more. (*Shouts.*) Good-bye, sister. Come, Kallappa!

He marches out. KALLAPPA follows him. A long silence. JAGADEVA, MALLIBOMMA, GUNDANNA, KALAYYA, etc. enter, greet BASAVANNA.

BASAVANNA. Oh, Jagganna, Mallibomma, come. Sit down.

JAGADEVA. So, the news has already reached His Majesty's ears—

BASAVANNA. A king is expected to know what's happening in his realm.

JAGADEVA. And I suppose he refuses to let us go ahead with the wedding.

BASAVANNA. That's what he said initially—

JAGADEVA. What he says does not matter.

MALLIBOMMA. We are here. We'll see what he can do.

JAGADEVA. We'll manage everything. We've worked it all out.

MALLIBOMMA. Why don't you give Basavanna the gist of our plan?

JAGADEVA (*eagerly*). The society of *sharanas* is expanding. Rapidly. And the number of our enemies is increasing too. They won't stay put. They're bound to cook up some mischief. It's essential we anticipate their moves—

BASAVANNA. Jagganna, what's all this for?

MALLIBOMMA. Listen to me. We *sharanas* have several orders of minstrels spreading our message already. They wander from place to place, go door to door carrying out their vows. Now here's the plan. Each one of them can gather information by listening carefully. They can establish contact with the tribals, the shepherds, the cowherds—

BASAVANNA. His Majesty has given his consent to the wedding.

There is a stunned silence.

MALLI—JAGADEVA (*unbelieving*). He has?

BASAVANNA. Yes.

JAGADEVA. But can you trust him? The chances are he'll stab us in the back.

BASAVANNA. There's no reason to expect that.

Pause.

JAGADEVA. You don't trust us. But you trust him.

BASAVANNA. Listen, if you're so keen to help with the wedding, why don't you do something very practical? Go and offer your services to the parents of the bride. They need all the help they can get!

JAGADEVA. Are you making fun of us?

BASAVANNA. No, Jagganna, the little problems of daily life—the ineffable demands, the pinpricks—they are the challenges a *sharana* must learn to love.

JAGADEVA. Then tell me. What does that vision of Allama mean? Why the filth and the pus and the horrors with all the beautiful things?

BASAVANNA. I don't know. Things like that cannot be explained. As we go on living, we have to unravel the meaning for ourselves, strand by strand.

JAGADEVA (*looks at MALLIBOMMA, smiles mysteriously*). So be it. *Sharan.*

BASAVANNA. *Sharan.*

JAGADEVA (*to MALLIBOMMA as they go out*). Perhaps a lucky few live long enough to solve riddles—

They exit: during the above scene GANGAMBIKA has come to the door, and watched the goings-on silently.

BASAVANNA (*to himself*). Father, don't make me hear all day 'Whose man, whose man, whose man in this?'

Let me hear:

'This man is mine, is mine, this man is mine'.

O Lord of the Meeting Rivers, make me feel

I am a son of the house.

Pause.

GANGAMBIKA. It's late. Come now.

BASAVANNA. I'm coming.

He gets up, when a group of well-dressed merchants appears at the main door.

MAN. Basavanna!

For a minute BASAVANNA cannot quite place the visitors. He is too dazed, fatigued. It's dark. He cannot clearly see the man's face.

BASAVANNA (*slowly*). Yes?

MAN. I'm sorry we're late. It's me—Kukke Shetty.

BASAVANNA. Of course! Of course! How could I forget? Please, come in. Come in. Sit down. I've been waiting for you.

He looks at GANGAMBIKA, gives an apologetic smile. Then turns to the visitors.

What seems to be the problem?

Scene Six

A house in the Courtesans' Quarter. DAMODARA BHATTA enters hurriedly and bangs on the main door.

DAMODARA. Indrani . . . Indrani . . .

A woman opens the door. He rushes in.

Where is the Yuvaraj?

WOMAN. He is with Indrani . . . inside.

DAMODARA. Call him out, instantly. Tell him it's Damodara Bhatta . . .

WOMAN (*giggles*). You don't need to introduce yourself. But I told you . . . he's inside. I don't think he'll like being pulled out.

DAMODARA (*starts banging on the inner door*). Indrani . . . Indrani . . .

INDRANI (*comes out*). Who's it? What's this? The Yuvaraj is resting. Didn't she inform you?

DAMODARA (*to the woman*). Bring a large pitcher of water.

Ignoring INDRANI's protests, DAMODARA BHATTA goes in, drags an inebriated SOVIDEVA out and props him up on a chair. The woman brings a pitcher of water. DAMODARA BHATTA pours the water on SOVIDEVA's head.

INDRANI. One would think a demon had got into you—

DAMODARA. And one would be quite right.

He slaps SOVIDEVA repeatedly on his cheeks.

SOVIDEVA (*waking up, groggily*). What . . . is it?

DAMODARA (*to INDRANI*). Wipe him dry—dress him up properly.

The two women attend to SOVIDEVA while DAMODARA addresses him.

Is the Yuvaraj feeling any brighter or shall I order another pitcher of cold water? Now, sir, listen to me carefully. A cobbler's son is supposed to marry a Brahmin girl today . . .

SOVIDEVA (*snarls*). I know. So what?

DAMODARA. The whole city is like tinder—ready to ignite into flames. The citizens have vowed to stop this unnatural alliance at any cost. A hundred mercenaries arrived from Sonnalige this morning, they say. A band of fighters from Tulunadu is getting ready in Kannamma's rest house—

INDRANI. Such flexing of muscles to scare those poor *sharanas*? Isn't it a bit excessive?

DAMODARA. Our information is that the *sharanas* too are spoiling for a fight. Houses have turned into armouries. It is impossible to predict which way the wind will blow. We can only dress up and wait.

INDRANI (*laughs*). Like an ageing courtesan?

In the distance wedding music begins to play. They all watch. The wedding procession, with Sheelavanta and Kalavati as the bridal pair, winds down the streets of Kalyan. The sharanas are tense, almost afraid, but ready to face any consequence. Most citizens watch the procession from their roof-tops.

SOVIDEVA. The impudent scum! They could have had a quiet wedding in some village. Instead they have to flaunt it here—in the capital.

INDRANI. Honestly, it's beyond me why this little wedding should make the world go hysterical!

DAMODARA (*gently, sadly*). Indrani, the Rig Veda tells us that the four varnas flowed out of the Primordial Man: the Brahmin from the head, the Shudra from the feet. So what we have here in this wedding is the desecration of the body of that Purusha. How horrifying! What's worse, the person behind this crime is not an insolent Shudra or a rebellious untouchable—but a Brahmin, endowed with youth, erudition, eloquence and intelligence! What perversity drives him to this sacrilege—this profanity?

INDRANI. But the *sharanas* have done so much for the down-trodden and the destitute. For women like us—

DAMODARA (*incensed*). Nature is iniquitous. Struggle, conflict, violence—that's nature for you. But civilization has been made possible because our Vedic tradition controls and directs that self-destructive energy. How large-hearted is our dharma! To each person it says you don't have to be anyone but yourself. One's caste is like one's home—meant for one's self and one's family. It is shaped to one's needs, one's comforts, one's traditions. And that is why the Vedic tradition can absorb and accommodate all differences, from Kashmir to Kanya Kumari. And even those said to be its victims have embraced its logic of inequality.

Basavanna, on the other hand, cannot bear difference. He wants uniformity—and one that will fit his prejudices! He loves work, so to be idle is sinful. He abhors violence, so you can't eat meat. He believes in a formless, single God. So idolatry is damned. For him the Brahmin

is like the jackal
who eats the vomit-nut,
gets dizzy,
and thinks all creation
is whirling:
why talk of these twice born
who caste-mark their bodies with mud?
If the owl blinded by day
thinks it's nightfall
does the world plunge into night,
you crazy fool?

He mocks the Shudras:

The pot is a god. The winnowing
fan is a god. The stone in the
street is a god. The comb is a
god. The bowstring is also a god.

Gods, gods, there are so many
there's no place left
for a foot.

He cannot grasp the elementary fact that a hierarchy which accommodates difference is more humane than an equality which enforces conformity.

INDRANI (*laughs*). You condemn the *sharanas*. But their words seem to dance on your tongue.

DAMODARA (*abashed*). To my ever-lasting shame, that's my one weakness, my indulgence in my tongue. Sanskrit is a language engraved on diamond, unchanging, austere. Eternal truths can be captured in its immutability. Kannada, our mother tongue, however, is pure flux. It changes from mouth to mouth, from caste to caste, from today to tomorrow. It is geared to the needs of squabbling couples, wheedling beggars, prostitutes spreading their saris out. It can only speak in inconstant moods. Its sensuality is addictive and the *sharanas* use it to pimp for their vulgarities.

SOVIDEVA (*wakes up*). So where is the massacre, priest? Where is the blood-letting?

DAMODARA. True enough. The wedding is over. And not a dog has barked. How can one explain it? (*Pause.*) Unless the *sharanas* were given protection—

SOVIDEVA. By whom?

DAMODARA. Protection on this scale—who else has the power to guarantee it but the King? The baffling question is—why is His Majesty tempting fate?

A knock on the door. DAMODARA BHATTA quickly pushes SOVIDEVA inside, and signals to INDRANI who opens the door. MANCHANNA KRAMITA enters, accompanied by some courtiers, tradesmen, soldiers, citizens, etc. A long pause.

DAMODARA BHATTA *smiles. Then starts proclaiming the titles.*

DAMODARA. Yuvarājendra Kālanjara-Purādhīshwara Suvarna-

Vrishabha-dhwaja Someshwara Rajendra Bho parāk! Bho parāk!

At a signal from him, SOVIDEVA enters and stands before them. They all bow to him.

ACT THREE

Scene Seven

Front yard of the palace. It is dawn. KALLAPPA sits, dozing in a corner of the yard. SOVIDEVA's voice is heard, calling him.

SOVIDEVA (*from outside*). Kallappa—Kallappa—

KALLAPPA *sits up, alert and listens.*

KALLAPPA. Is that you, young Master?

SOVIDEVA (*from outside*). Come here.

KALLAPPA *is unwilling to move from his spot. He looks around, half baffled, half irritated. DAMODARA BHATTA enters.*

DAMODARA. Can't you hear the young Master calling you?

KALLAPPA. What is it?

DAMODARA. How should I know? I must say you would make a proper Feudal Lord. To question the Yuvaraj without even stirring from your seat. Go. I'll keep an eye on things here.

KALLAPPA *looks at the door of BIJJALA's room on the first floor and moves out most unwillingly. As he steps out of the yard, he is attacked by half a dozen armed men who knock him down unconscious and drag him out.*

DAMODARA BHATTA *signals. Several of the armed men enter the yard and spread out quietly behind the various corners of the palace. Only a young boy, MARIAPPA, remains with DAMODARA BHATTA. At a signal from DAMODARA BHATTA, the boy calls out in a voice shaking with fear.*

MARIAPPA. Bankanna—

No response. DAMODARA signals to MARIAPPA to call again. Bankanna—

BANKANNA, *more or less the same age as MARIAPPA, appears.*

BANKANNA. Yes?

MARIAPPA *is sweating. So BANKANNA asks testily.*

What is it? And what are you doing here?

DAMODARA. Has His Majesty completed his bath?

BANKANNA. Yes. He's doing his pooja. (*Pointing to MARIAPPA.*) But what's that to him?

A soldier swoops upon BANKANNA, gags him, lifts him up and takes him away.

DAMODARA (*explaining to MARIAPPA while keeping an eye on BIJJALA's pooja room*). Mariappa, this Bankanna accompanies the King on his way to the fields in the morning. Carries the pot of water to wash His Majesty's behind. It's a time ideally suited to fill the King's ears. The King has constipation and, as his bowels lighten, he responds benignly to every suggestion. So this whipper-snapper has virtually ruled the King these last three years. Now on, you are the King's pot-bearer, you understand? Whatever the King says, the answer is: 'I don't know, sir.' Control your tongue, keep your ears open and you'll go far.

The effect aimed at during the above exchange is of a casual conversation going on in the immense palace yard—a normal every-day event. But the boy is stiff with fear and DAMODARA BHATTA's eyes are rivetted to BIJJALA's door. DAMODARA signals and a man enters carrying a silver salver, with clothes piled on it. At last BIJJALA's voice is heard. DAMODARA pushes MARIAPPA away.

BIJJALA's voice. Rudrappa, where are my robes?

The man rushes up the staircase and goes in. The following conversation from inside is heard.

BIJJALA. Who are you? And where is Rudrappa?

MAN. Rudrappa is absent today, Master . . .

BIJJALA. What's happening? Has my entire retinue fled the city like a pack of refugees? This one hasn't come! That one's absent!

A sudden roar. The man rolls down the stairs as though tossed out physically. A semi-dressed BIJJALA follows him out.

BIJJALA. You country bumpkin, who took you on? I ask for the court robes and you leave the crown out? Your parents be—! (*Calls out.*) Rukmayya!

DAMODARA (*steps forward*). Rukmayya hasn't reported on duty today, sir.

BIJJALA. He hasn't? Blast it! Has the black plague carried away the whole city? And who are you? Ah! the priest in the Queen's Chambers, aren't you? I see you running around Sovi. But this is too early for him—

DAMODARA. A supplication, Your Majesty.

BIJJALA. Here? At this time of the day? What is it?

DAMODARA. From Raya Murari Sovideva Rajendra—

BIJJALA (*baffled*). Who? You mean our Sovi? Since when has he started sporting these ridiculous titles?

Suddenly he realizes what he is saying.

Kallappa! Where is our Kallappa? (*Calls out.*) Kallappa—

DAMODARA. Kallappa is indisposed, sir.

The message is clear. BIJJALA rushes into his room. Bellows from inside.

BIJJALA. Treachery! Bloody treachery! Help . . .

He rushes out.

My sword! Which bastard dared touch my sword?

RAMBHAVATI (*rushes out*). What is it now?

She sees DAMODARA BHATTA.

What is it, sir?

BIJJALA *rushes down into the yard, runs to the main door, pushes*

it. It is locked from outside. He bangs on the door. Then looks through the window.

BIJJALA. We are surrounded by the infantry! Treason—

RAMBHAVATI. Please calm yourself. What's happened? I don't understand anything.

BIJJALA. What more can happen? It's all over. It's damnation.

Your son has slit my throat. He's trapped me here . . .

RAMBHAVATI (*collapses*). No. It can't be true. Eeravva—Eeravva—

DAMODARA (*rushes to her*). Please, Your Majesty. There is no cause for panic. (*Orders.*) Bring Eeravva here.

BIJJALA (*bangs his head against the wall*). I was blind, Rambha. Blind! Fool! Fool! I was on the watch against the worms outside—while raising a snake inside the house. Imbecile!

EERAVVA comes in. She rushes to the Queen. She knows what is happening and is weeping uncontrollably. She and BIJJALA help RAMBHA up.

SOVIDEVA enters wearing the crown. He is surrounded by a few courtiers, but mainly soldiers. He shakes like a leaf.

RAMBHAVATI. What's going on, son? Say it's not your doing—

DAMODARA. Eeravva, the Queen shouldn't have been allowed to strain herself in the first place. Lead her in.

RAMBHAVATI. Aren't you ashamed to wear that thing in your father's presence? Sovi, if it's true that I have reared you on my breasts, take off that crown. Give it to your father.

He doesn't move.

Thoo, you, you butcher! If you don't take it off, my curse be on your head—

DAMODARA (*sternly*). Eeravva, didn't you hear me?

RAMBHAVATI turns on DAMODARA in fury, when BIJJALA restrains her.

BIJJALA. Go in, Rambha. The man speaks sense. They have

won this throw. Nothing to be gained by making a scene now. Go in. Go.

RAMBHAVATI is led in. BIJJALA walks to SOVIDEVA.

So! Perhaps you do have something between your legs after all—

Suddenly SOVIDEVA kicks BIJJALA, who, taken unawares, rolls to the ground. A chorus of surprise from those present. DAMODARA BHATTA rushes to the King's aid.

BIJJALA. Don't you dare touch me!

He gets up, smiling.

Who taught you that one? Kallappa?

The smile on his face disappears.

Where is Kallappa? Where is he?

No reply.

What have you done with him? You have killed him, haven't you?

Tears well up in his eyes.

How could you bring yourselves to do that, you bloody murderers? He was a babe—an innocent babe. You won't find another one like him in this Kaliyuga. How could you harm him?

He wipes his tears. Those watching are aghast to see BIJJALA cry. But he makes no attempt to hide his grief.

You kill Kallappa but spare my life. Don't I deserve the consideration you have shown him?

DAMODARA. Sir, a throne is ringed by circles rippling out into circles; the feudatories, the flatterers, the astrologers, the courtesans, the wrestlers, the spies—Your Majesty knows. And they all survive. But a man like Kallappa disrupts the

design. He lacked imagination and could not be corrupted. He was dangerous.

BIJJALA. You stretch your tongue too far, priest. Watch out lest you trip over it.

DAMODARA. Forgive us, Your Majesty. We mean no treason. We have eaten the salt of the Kalachuryas and have pledged our loyalty to the dynasty. The Empire is already ringing with proclamations—stone inscriptions are being erected. His Majesty has decided to retire voluntarily and crown with his own hands his youngest son, Yuvaraj—

BIJJALA. Ha! Will anyone believe I would place this cadaver on the throne while four other sons are alive and kicking? Won't the whole world collapse in hysterics?

SOVIDEVA steps out angrily. But this time BIJJALA is ready, which deters him. SOVIDEVA stands nonplussed, looking a little foolish.

DAMODARA (*gently*). If you please, sir—

DAMODARA BHATTA gestures to the door. SOVIDEVA walks out, relieved.

BIJJALA. This game is yours. I concede that. But be under no illusion that this is the last round. If you poison me, the army in Kalyan will rise in revolt. My other sons will rush down full force. On the other hand, how long are you going to keep me alive?

DAMODARA. Each comment of His Majesty's is worthy of the *Artha Shastra*. Which only adds to our puzzlement.

BIJJALA. Yes?

DAMODARA. This marriage arranged by the *sharanas* was no trifling matter. On the one hand stands the Vedic Dharma, which has branched out in strength over the centuries and now shades the whole of Aryavarta. On the other, there is the *sharana* movement—a pestilence—but of a virulence not seen since the days of the Buddha. These two face each other in implacable hostility. The battle is without

quarter. And if Your Majesty had not intervened, the *sharanas* would have met their fate on the day of that infamous wedding. But Your Majesty staunched the wrath of the people and invited disaster on his own head. Why? Why?

BIJJALA. Will you understand if I explain?

DAMODARA. I am a Brahmin, sir. It's my duty to understand.

BIJJALA. I fear this one may not be within your grasp.

Pause.

A man wandering in the desert, his throat parched, will graze on a patch of green, the size of one's palm, for its moisture. It's the same when one wanders in a godless world. The smallest—the most imperceptible—sign will do.

DAMODARA. Sign, sir?

BIJJALA (*has difficulty in using the word*). Yes . . . of a miracle.

DAMODARA. What miracle, sir?

BIJJALA. A Brahmin girl chooses to marry an untouchable and two hundred thousand people come out in support of it! That is the only miracle Basavanna has ever performed. But it is a miracle. Would you have stopped it?

DAMODARA. That's no miracle, sir. It's a crime against Nature—

BIJJALA (*quietly*). I knew that was beyond your reach. You need to have thirsted for a miracle to recognize one when you see it. (*Turns and calls.*) Rambha! Rambhavati!

He walks out.

Scene Eight

*Basavanna's house. A conference of sharanas is going on.
The atmosphere is highly charged.*

BASAVANNA. The wedding of Sheelavanta-Kalavati could have turned into an unpleasant event. It didn't. For which we must give credit to the King—

People protest. There is an uproar.

HARALAYYA (*raises his hand*). Let Basavanna finish—

BASAVANNA (*more firmly*). There could have been a blood-bath. Alternately, the King could have forbidden the whole affair—driven us out of this city—

SHARANA ONE. Why must you glorify the King, Basavanna? Why should he have forbidden the wedding? We were not breaking any law.

SHARANA THREE. It is no trivial matter to earn the enmity of two hundred thousand hard-working, law-abiding citizens.

SHARANA TWO. Suppose the King had said 'no'. So what? Would we have taken it lying down? We don't want to pick fights. But no one is going to push us around—

BASAVANNA. Fortunately nothing of that sort happened. But all of you know the most recent news. They say the King is being held prisoner. That's why I sent for you.

SHARANA FOUR. What would you have us do? We'll do as you say.

BASAVANNA. We should all go and gather in front of the palace—

WOMAN SHARANA. And demand to see the King. We should all sit down there and not move until the King comes out and talks to us as a free man.

BASAVANNA. It will work only if all of us go there and stand united.

SHARANA THREE. But why? It's a family squabble. A routine political event.

BASAVANNA. The King has risked his whole future for our sake. It would be rank betrayal not to stand by him now.

Commotion.

SHARANA FOUR. Betrayal is a big word. But not one to which our monarch is a stranger. Let's not forget that the palace he's now locked in once belonged to his trusting Masters.

SHARANA TWO. I'm sorry, but I can't understand you, Basavanna. Didn't you say that Bijjala himself told you he wanted nothing more to do with you—or us?

BASAVANNA. Yes.

SHARANA TWO. That he further added, 'If you *sharanas* don't stay away from me, you'll regret it—'

BASAVANNA. Something like that, yes.

SHARANA TWO. Then why are we forcing ourselves upon him?

BASAVANNA. Words spoken in anger. Whatever they were, we must stand by him—because he has nobody else but us.

MADHUVARASA. The world is awe-struck at the wedding of Sheela and Kalavati. We *sharanas* have at last shown our mettle, our indomitable spirit. And after all that, you want to lay the credit at the King's feet? I can't believe it!

SHARANA THREE. Dynasties come and go. The Chalukya is gone. The Kalachurya rules today. This one will also be gone tomorrow. But we *sharanas* have built a community which stands beyond political twists and turns. We have built our own, grounded in our own metaphysics, shaped by our practice. And it is enough that we attend to its welfare. We know you're a friend of Bijjala's. You should do as your conscience tells you. We shan't object to that. But surely, this is the moment to make the four quarters realize that the *sharanas* do not need to sit and sway in the shadow of the throne, along with you?

SHARANA FIVE. Basavanna, I don't know what's got into us

these days. But something has, that's for certain. Some of us are afraid. Others lazy. Others busy rationalizing their indolence. If you want us to move—and move together—there are only two alternatives: command us to do so—
 BASAVANNA. Ours is a spiritual brotherhood, a community of experience. To tell any *sharana* what to do would be to insult him.

SHARANA FIVE. Then declare that there has been a miracle, that you saw Lord Shiva in your dreams. And the whole lot will leap up and follow your lead. There's no other way.

BASAVANNA. There is. Let each *sharana* listen to his inner self and follow its dictates.

What use
 is knowledge within
 as long as there's no action without?
 If there's no body
 would there be a shelter
 for the breath of life?
 Can one see one's face
 if there's no mirror?

And the world out there—that is the only mirror we have.
 What use is bhakti if it only hides its face?

Murmurs of anger, dissent.

SHARANA FOUR. Are you calling us escapists?

KAKKAYYA. It's past midnight. We have talked enough. Tell us what you plan to do, and each one of us will decide for himself what he should do.

BASAVANNA. Tomorrow, at dawn, after my prayers, I shall leave for the palace.

KAKKAYYA. So be it. Let's disperse now.

The sharanas disperse, fiercely arguing. BASAVANNA and GANGAMBIKA see them off. BASAVANNA comes back. Long pause.

BASAVANNA. I call out to you, Father.
 I cry out to you, Father.
 Will you not reply?
 Yet I keep on calling to you.
 Lord of the meeting rivers,
 Why this silence?

A child is heard crying inside. BASAVANNA goes in, brings the child out and sits playing with it. GANGAMBIKA comes and sits. Silence.

BASAVANNA. This is the blossom of our vitals, a gift from the Lord. And yet one has no time to pick him up.

GANGAMBIKA. It's as though we have been so carried away by the excitement of building a house that we have forgotten what we came here for—to buy a few basic groceries.

He looks up at her, smiling.

BASAVANNA. Just what I was thinking, Ganga. And in the cacophony of the crowd, we do not even hear the Lord's voice. One needs to go back again to where there is silence—where one again becomes an itinerant.

GANGAMBIKA. What then about tomorrow?

BASAVANNA. Whether the others come with me or not, Ganga, this is my last night in this house.

Tears well up in her eyes.

GANGAMBIKA. Perhaps—that's best.

BASAVANNA. And once a person turns his back on his own house, does he owe the palace more? Let's hope tomorrow the King will receive his due from the *sharanas*. After that, it'll be the formless space beyond the palace. Suddenly nothingness has begun to beckon me.

He who can turn
 space into form
 he alone is a *sharana*.
 He who can turn form into space,

he alone can experience the linga.
 If these two became one,
 would there be a way
 into you, O Lord
 of the meeting rivers?

Scene Nine

Night. JAGADEVA, MALLIBOMMA, KALAYYA, etc., surrounded by weapons of various sorts, are performing a private ritual.

JAGADEVA. Now we mingle our blood.

He cuts his forearm. The others follow suit. They mix blood, wound to wound.

So we are brothers now. Our blood flows together. *Om Namah Shivāya!*

They repeat the chant.

Our elders continue to debate in Basavanna's house. Enough sound and fury there to bring the roof-beams down. That's all the old fogies are good for. So it's left to us to exterminate the vermin, the enemies of Lord Shiva. Is that clear? Good. Now let's have your reports. One by one. Malli, you first.

MALLIBOMMA. For five gold coins the palace guard Rachappa is ready to show us the secret passages—

JAGADEVA. What passages?

MALLIBOMMA. —that lead into the palace.

OTHERS (*excited*). Really? Are you sure? That's wonderful.

JAGADEVA *silences the excited gathering with a wave of his hand.*

JAGADEVA. We don't need him. I could lead you to them myself.

Exclamations of surprise.

MALLIBOMMA. You? How do you know them?

JAGADEVA. I was a regular visitor to the palace as a child, remember? With my father. And we used to play hide-and-seek in those passages. Even Sovi was there—

MALLIBOMMA. But I don't understand! Those passages were meant for a quick get-away in the event of an enemy attack. They should be secret. You played games there?

JAGADEVA. The royal family had no need for the passages. They took to their heels at the very mention of the enemy—through the back door!

Laughter. Only KALAYYA doesn't laugh.

KALAYYA. So all these days you knew about these passages and didn't let on.

JAGADEVA. I'm telling you now. Look, I'll lead you in, isn't that enough?

KALAYYA. And all along, while we were arguing and shouting and tying ourselves into knots about how to get inside the palace, you just sat there—smilingsmugly—feeling superior, the solution already in your hands, didn't you? You Brahmins, you are all the same. You're only interested in having the laugh on others.

JAGADEVA. Don't you dare mention my caste, Kalayya—

MALLIBOMMA. Hey, stop it! Don't let's start squabbling now!

GUNDANNA comes in.

GUNDANNA. Jagganna, your wife is here to see you.

JAGADEVA. I can't see her. Tell her to go away. She knows I

have sworn not to look upon a woman's face till we have achieved our goal—

GUNDANNA. This is the fourth time she's come since yesterday.

JAGADEVA. So what? I am not coming out. Tell her to go away!

GUNDANNA. I can't, I'm sorry. I can't even bear to look at her. She says your mother has taken to the mat and won't say a word. The neighbours treat them like pariahs. Poor child! She comes, sits out there like a ghost, goes away, comes back again. All she wants is a word with you. My heart bleeds for her—

JAGADEVA. Then go and bleed somewhere else. She has to attend to her mother-in-law. She'll go back soon enough. We're not playing games here. We are here to fight for our faith and I have taken a vow of celibacy. Can't she grasp a simple thing like that? Can't any one? And why are you all staring at me—as though I have done something wrong? As though I were a criminal—a—a—

He chokes, goes and sits in a corner, holding his head. The others look away.

Scene Ten

Same as Scene Two. RAMBHAVATI is bed-ridden. EERAVVA is doing a perfunctory pooja in the adjacent sanctum. BIJJALA paces up and down muttering to himself. In a corner, near the window, sits MARIAPPA staring vacantly out.

RAMBHAVATI. How long are you going to pace about like

that? It's a wonder you haven't worn out the soles of your feet—

BIJJALA. You go to sleep.

RAMBHAVATI. What's the use of walking up and down? Will it bring our son here? Will it fetch Basavanna?

BIJJALA (*snarls*). Basavanna? What do you mean Basavanna? Why bring him into this?

RAMBHAVATI. You can't conjure him up by just—

BIJJALA. What are you talking about? Have you gone off your head? Why should he come here? I told him to stay away—not to meddle in my affairs. Why should he come? There's nothing between us now. I wasn't even thinking of him.

RAMBHAVATI. Don't lie. At least, not to me. I have shared twenty-five years with you, and I know.

BIJJALA. Woman, will you shut up? or should I . . .

Pause.

All right. All right! So let's suppose you're right. Let's suppose I was thinking of Basavanna. Why shouldn't I? I supported their movement. They know that. They could have stood by me. All they had to do was to get together and demand my release and my son would have come crawling to me. But no! Basavanna won't come, because I have told him not to. Those *sharanas* are obstinate—

RAMBHAVATI. Just stop pacing about. Come and sit by me.

BIJJALA. I deserve this. No point in blaming others—

He sits beside RAMBHAVATI, tense and restless. Commotion outside. Servants of the palace are seen running. MARIAPPA addresses one of them.

MARIAPPA. What's it? What's happened?

WOMAN. They say Basavanna is on his way here—with lots of *sharanas*.

BIJJALA. Basavanna! He's coming? Nonsense! That's not pos-

sible. (*Jumps up.*) Didn't I tell you he'll come? How many *sharanas* are there with him? Ask her—

MARIAPPA. How many *sharanas*—

But the woman is gone. Others rush past the window.

BIJJALA. Since he would have started from his home, he will be approaching the palace from the east. That means they should be visible from that skylight in the sanctum.

He rushes into the sanctum.

Eeravva, out you go! Quick!

RAMBHAVATI. What's all this? Let her at least complete the pooja—

BIJJALA. Later. Later. Out now. Out!

He almost pushes EERAVVA out.

Now, Mariappa, come in. Climb up to that skylight—

MARIAPPA *is unwilling to step into the sanctum.*

Don't dawdle outside, ass. I order you to step into the god's room. I permit you—anyway, nobody will know!

RAMBHAVATI *clicks her tongue disapprovingly.* MARIAPPA *steps in gingerly.* BIJJALA *tries to help him climb up to the skylight. But he keeps slipping.*

BIJJALA (*frustrated*). Where's the ladder? Ask for one—No, wait. Climb on to my shoulders. Here.

MARIAPPA (*scared*). I can't, Master—I can't!

BIJJALA. You dare say no to me, you son of a whore? I am Bijjala and I'm not dead yet. If you make any more fuss, I'll just wring your neck. So get up—

He bends. The boy sits on his shoulder.

That's not high enough. Stand up. Go on! I won't drop you. (*Laughs.*) I am your sovereign after all—I bear the weight of the earth on my shoulders. I won't drop you, I promise.

MARIAPPA *stands on BIJJALA's shoulders with the support of the wall.*

Basavanna is here, Rambha. I'll show that son of yours—

RAMBHAVATI. He's been bad. But don't be hard on him—

BIJJALA. For a start, I have to return that kick of his! Other matters can follow in due course—

To MARIAPPA.

What are you gawping at? Can you see anything?

MARIAPPA. Yes, Master. But they are far away—

BIJJALA. Just tell me what you see. How many?

MARIAPPA. Many, Master, so many!

BIJJALA (*roaring*). So many! So many! How many, you dolt? And where are they?

MARIAPPA. All around the temple of Ravana-Siddheswara . . . It's saffron . . . saffron . . .

BIJJALA. The temple of Ravana-Siddheswara? Good, continue. Beyond that is the street of washermen—by the river. And next to that is the carpenters' street. And on this side is the old excise post. You see all that?

MARIAPPA. Yes, sir.

BIJJALA. Then the streets should all be bursting with the *sharanas*—an ocean of saffron. Even a mere fifty thousand will choke that area up—

MARIAPPA. No, Master.

BIJJALA (*enraged*). What do you mean 'No, Master'?

MARIAPPA. The terraces of houses are packed with people—ordinary people—watching. But the *sharanas*—they are many—they are around the temple of Ravana-Siddheswara and then in the street of washermen. Not in the carpenters' street—

BIJJALA. Then they must be spilling over on this side, toward the old excise post—

MARIAPPA. No, sir. No one there yet.

BIJJALA. Have you lost your eyes? Look again!

The door opens and DAMODARA BHATTA steps in, smiling gently.

DAMODARA. Mariappa, you low-born cur, don't you know you are not to step into the sanctum? You dare pollute the royal pooja room? Come out instantly or else—

MARIAPPA jumps down in fright and rushes out of the sanctum.

BIJJALA (*trying to hide his discomfiture*). I asked him in.

DAMODARA. If Your Majesty had but asked, I would have had the door unlocked. This way, sir. The upper terrace provides a better view of the city.

RAMBHAVATI (*unable to hold herself back*). Has he come?

DAMODARA. Yes, Your Majesty. He is on his way.

BIJJALA. It's only because he's seen Basavanna that this leech has come twitching to us—

BIJJALA rushes out. The palace retinue which has already collected on the terrace bow to BIJJALA as he rushes to the edge of the terrace and leans out eagerly. The smile disappears from his face. He stands dazed, unbelieving.

DAMODARA BHATTA comes behind him.

DAMODARA. Yes, sir. And there he is! We too were at a loss about how to meet this eventuality. The Yuvaraj couldn't sleep a wink all night. But now our accountant has carefully enumerated the *sharanas* accompanying Basavanna—there are precisely seven hundred and seventy!

BASAVANNA arrives in the yard in front of the palace, followed by his sharanas. BIJJALA and BASAVANNA watch each other. The audience too is transfixed. A long pause.

BIJJALA. So you have come? Good. Good. Come. But . . . it's damned awkward . . . meeting like this.

BASAVANNA. I wanted to come. So I have. Those who wanted to come with me, they are here.

BIJJALA. I hadn't asked you to come. You hadn't said you would. But you are here. (*Pause*.) You didn't desert me.

BASAVANNA. How are you, sir?

BIJJALA. What can go wrong with me? A buffaloe fatted for the Goddess Mariamma.

BASAVANNA. And Her Majesty?

BIJJALA. She's coughing again. It's . . . this sudden change of weather.

Pause.

Well, I had better go in. She isn't too well. (*Pause*.) You'd better go too. Not much point our hanging on here. (*Pause*.) Go, Basavanna.

BASAVANNA (*nods*). I shall, sir. When we shall see each other again, I don't know. So pardon me for preaching. But let's not try and bend God's generosity to our desires. Let His will be our life. Even if He tortures us, defeats us, our triumph will be in that He has attended to us.

BIJJALA (*irritable*). There you go again! I never know what you mean. Can't you put it more simply?

BASAVANNA (*smiles*). Let me try, sir. (*Pause*.) Trust in Him.

BIJJALA (*shakes his head*). That's hard.

BASAVANNA. It is possible. If only you would believe—

Long pause. Suddenly—

BIJJALA. Do you remember? Your verse—

He who runs is not a warrior.
He who begs is not a devotee.
A warrior shouldn't run.
A devotee shouldn't beg.
I'll not run, I'll not beg,
O Lord of the meeting rivers.

Did I get it right?

BASAVANNA *nods*. *Long pause.*

BASAVANNA. Believe in Him. I too shall go now to Kappadi of the meeting rivers in search of him. May Shiva bless you. *Sharan.*

BIJJALA nods. BASAVANNA and companions go away. BIJJALA returns to RAMBHAVATI's room, locks the door from inside and bursts into a mixture of sobs and laughter.

BIJJALA. Basavanna is here, Rambha. I shall be King again and you the Queen. A hundred and fifty thousand *sharanas* are on their way—not all of them here yet, of course. But they'll be here soon. Our son is realizing his folly. In no time at all he'll surrender . . .

He sits down by her side.

Don't you worry about anything now. Everything is going to be all right again—

She doesn't reply. He closes his eyes and leans back against the wall. In the far distance, the song sung by BASAVANNA and his sharanas is heard.

Scene Eleven

The palace. SOVIDEVA with MANCHANNA KRAMITA and DAMODARA BHATTA.

DAMODARA (*bubbling with excitement*). The *sharanas* lie inert, lost, adrift in a void of their own creation. Excellent! Now we must act—

SOVIDEVA. What do we do?

DAMODARA. Arrest those responsible for the wedding. Expel the leaders of—

MANCHANNA (*gently*). What will that achieve? Basavanna is gone. But their organization continues. Money continues to flow into their coffers—

SOVIDEVA. I know. But how is that?

MANCHANNA. It's simple, sir. That inter-caste wedding shook every citizen of Kalyan. For him it meant an era in which any untouchable could ask for his daughter's hand in marriage! A nightmare! So he supported us against your father. Yet he needs the *sharanas* for his profits. It's a bond of greed—of mercantile calculation. And that has to be severed.

SOVIDEVA. So what do you advise?

MANCHANNA (*smiles*). I'm almost tempted to say 'Let's do nothing!' The *sharanas* have lost their drive and in course of time are bound to revert to caste for sheer survival. Unfortunately Basavanna is alive and we can take nothing for granted. It is imperative that we strike—immediately.

SOVIDEVA. How do we do that?

MANCHANNA. Sir, King Mihirakula of Kashmir took care of the Buddhist menace by decimating sixteen hundred viharas. Our Pandya neighbour impaled eight thousand Jain scoundrels along the highway. So why are we being so circumspect?

DAMODARA. The coronation is round the corner. It's essential that the new king is seen as capable of forgiveness, generosity—

MANCHANNA. And what's a coronation, pray? The gross body is cleansed of its lowly birth and made worthy of receiving Vedic mantras and the Brahmin's salutations. The King partakes of the divine. Who dare judge the King? We are there to interpret the sacred texts. The King is there to implement our advice. That's enough.

SOVIDEVA. Bravo! That's grand! You are right. I am the King

and I can now make them pay for defying me at the Treasury!

DAMODARA. Please, Your Majesty—

SOVIDEVA (*excited*). I shall strike terror in their hearts, I shall wreak havoc.

MANCHANNA. And then pay a brief visit to you father-in-law, sir? His support may come in handy—

SOVIDEVA. Yes. And see our Queen again! She *is* our Queen, after all, frigid bitch though she is. (*To DAMODARA BHATTA.*) You'll accompany us?

DAMODARA. Someone is needed in the capital, sir. I suggest I stay behind.

MANCHANNA. Whenever King Bijjala went out on his campaigns, he left the city to my care.

To DAMODARA BHATTA.

In fact, His Majesty will need someone to keep him company in his father-in-law's house and attend to the daily rituals.

DAMODARA BHATTA *reacts in anger but is silenced by MANCHANNA KRAMITA's unctuous smile.*

SOVIDEVA. Let's go then.

They all go out. Drums are heard in the distance and provide the bridge to the next scene.

Scene Twelve

JAGADEVA, MALLIBOMMA, KALAYYA *practising the martial arts*. GUNDANNA *comes rushing in and rolls on the ground in agony.*

GUNDANNA. *Ayyo . . . Ayyo . . .* Kala! Malli! I can't bear it. I can't . . . Mother!

OTHERS. What's it, Gundanna? What's happened? What are you screaming about?

GUNDANNA. What can I say? Mother . . . I'll die. I can't bear it! Haralayya—Madhuvarasa—

He bangs his head on the floor.

MALLIBOMMA. Behave yourself, Gundanna. Take hold of yourself. What's happened to Haralayya?

GUNDANNA. It's harrowing! A while ago—the King's soldiers arrested Haralayya and took him to the city square. They also brought Madhuvarasa there—And then—then—as the city watched—they plucked their eyes out—

A reaction of horror from those present.

Plucked out their eyes with iron rods—bound them hand and foot and had them dragged through the streets—tied to elephants' legs—*Ayyo!* How can I tell you?—Torn limbs along the lanes, torn entrails, flesh, bones—they died screaming!

JAGADEVA. And no one intervened? What about the *sharanas*?

GUNDANNA. They all watched, shut inside their houses. I can't stop shivering. It was horrible.

KALAYYA. Shiva! Shiva!

GUNDANNA. Now—they are impaling their bodies by the city gate—

JAGADEVA. *Thoo! Thoo! Thoo!* Our manhood be spat upon.

We are not just cowards but cowards ten times over. Come on, let's tie anklets and dance like eunuchs—

KALAYYA. I told you we must act before—

JAGADEVA. You did? Always the 'I-told-you-so' Kalayya, aren't you? But suggest something, and immediately a thousand excuses—

KALAYYA. Watch it, Jagga. I won't take any more nonsense from you—

JAGADEVA. What'll you do?

MALLIBOMMA. Jagganna, Kalayya, stop it! Gundanna, what about the women of the house?

JAGADEVA. I know Kalavati's mother has gone away with the couple.

GUNDANNA. Sheela's mother saw her husband's body—a grotesque bundle of rags—and ran down the street, screaming. It froze one's blood. No one knows where she is. Perhaps a lake or a well—

JAGADEVA. We can't sit here like old women. Come on. Let's attack the palace. Sovi won't expect us to act so soon. He doesn't know I know the secret route. We'll trap him, cut the bastard into pieces.

MALLIBOMMA. But is it safe to go out armed in broad daylight?

GUNDANNA. The streets are deserted. The city is dead—like a cemetery!

JAGADEVA. Come on!

They rush out.

Scene Thirteen

The palace. JAGADEVA and others rush in along with RACHAPPA, naked swords in their hands.

RACHAPPA. Jagganna, you've been made fools of! There's no one in the palace. They've all run away. Sovideva—Damodara Bhatta—

MALLIBOMMA. Then why didn't you let us know? It was your job—

RACHAPPA. I was waiting for you outside. I didn't know you could get into the palace without me. Besides, I sent word with Mudda—

KALAYYA. He's probably rushed straight to some whore!

JAGADEVA. We'll be the laughing stock of the world. For all our slogans of revolution, we've plunged straight into a heap of shit.

MALLIBOMMA. It's too late to worry about that now. It's dangerous to stay on here. Let's go—

JAGADEVA. And what do we do out there? Wear bangles in public?

MALLIBOMMA. No point hanging on here. He says the palace is empty—

RACHAPPA. Except for that lunatic.

KALAYYA. What lunatic?

RACHAPPA. The old King—

MALLIBOMMA. The old King?

JAGADEVA. You mean—Bijjala?

RACHAPPA. They say he's been mad since the Queen died. He refuses to leave the palace. Refuses to step out of the Queen's chambers—

KALAYYA. Any guards there?

RACHAPPA. They too ran away—naturally.

JAGADEVA. Take us to him. Quick.

They rush out.

Scene Fourteen

Rambhavati's chamber. The same as in Scene Two.

MARIAPPA dozes in a corner. BIJJALA is sprawled in a dark corner of the sanctum. JAGADEVA and others rush in.

MARIAPPA sees them, and rushes out.

BIJJALA (from inside). Who's that?

JAGADEVA (comes to the door of the sanctum). Victory to Your Majesty.

BIJJALA. Who is that talking about my majesty?

JAGADEVA. We have come to see you, sir—

BIJJALA. Come in.

JAGADEVA, sword in hand, is about to step into the sanctum. He beckons others to follow him. But MALLIBOMMA stops him.

MALLIBOMMA (shakes his head and whispers, pointing to the sword). You can't take that in.

JAGADEVA (to BIJJALA). We have travelled a long distance, sir. Our feet are caked with mud. We don't want to dirty the temple.

BIJJALA (laughs). This god hasn't seen any worship for many days now. The floor hasn't even been swept.

JAGADEVA. But, sir—

BIJJALA. It's cool in here. I'm not stirring out. Say your piece from there or go away.

JAGADEVA (suddenly). We have come from Kappadi, sir.

BIJJALA (waking up). Kappadi?

JAGADEVA. —of the meeting rivers. From Basavanna.

BIJJALA. Why didn't you say so? Wait. What does he say?

He gets up. MALLIBOMMA looks at JAGADEVA, uncomprehending. JAGADEVA dismisses him with a wave of the hand, signals to the others to get ready and stands poised to strike.

BIJJALA steps out of the sanctum.

BIJJALA. What does he say?

JAGADEVA. Strike, Rachappa. Kalayya—Now!

He strikes BIJJALA with his sword. The others too attack. BIJJALA wounded, taken by surprise, reels back. Then the warrior in him comes awake. He pushes them back and rushes into the sanctum and stands ready to fend off further attacks.

MALLIBOMMA watches, stunned, uncomprehending.

JAGADEVA. Come, Malli! Come on, Kalayya!

He tries to pursue BIJJALA into the sanctum but MALLIBOMMA blocks his way.

MALLIBOMMA. No, Jagganna. Nobody sheds blood in there!

JAGADEVA ignores him, and tries to side-step him, but MALLIBOMMA is adamant.

Have you forgotten our vow? No one desecrates the Lord's house while I am around.—

JAGADEVA. So what do you want me to do?

MALLIBOMMA. Leave the swords out here.

JAGADEVA (helpless, puts his sword down). Come on! Let's drag him out.

MALLIBOMMA. But why? He's no better than a patched-up piece of leather. What's the point of all this?

JAGADEVA. He's our only chance, don't you see? If we go out empty-handed, we'll go down in history as incompetent clowns. Not just our enemies but our own people will laugh at us.

MALLIBOMMA. You want to kill him for that?

JAGADEVA. Don't talk too much, Malli. It's to me that Basavanna has passed on the vision of Allama. Me! No one else. He's left it to me to interpret it. You know that. Now do as I say: kill him and meaning will take care of itself.

All four put their swords aside and go in. BIJJALA, bleeding, is waiting for them. They grapple with him, try to pull him out

but he is like a bull elephant, rooted to the earth, unyielding. Suddenly he shakes himself free and runs to the linga and embraces it. They pounce upon him and try to wrench him free. But to no avail. BIJJALA gives a loud laugh.

BIJJALA. This, boys, is known as Bijjala's Grip! Study it! Move back now. Back.

They let go and move back.

Everyone asks the same question: Miracle? What miracle? But look here now. Basavanna couldn't make me bend before the Lord. My wife couldn't. But you young whelps have made me cling to Him. Something must be wrong with me. Whatever I reach for—wherever I crawl—I bump into miracles. Huh! All right. Let's have it. Where are you from? My son hasn't sent you—that's certain. He has more seasoned killers. You can barely wield a knife. I could have whacked you all down like rats. But I'm tired now. Who are you? Where have you come from?

MALLIBOMMA. We are *sharanas*, sir.

BIJJALA. I see. And it's true Basavanna sent you?

JAGADEVA. Yes, sir.

MALLIBOMMA. No, sir. We came on our own.

BIJJALA. Just like that? To kill me? Go ahead. Kill me. I won't even ask why. I am sick of asking. You'll lighten my burden. But there is a condition—

MALLIBOMMA. Sir—

BIJJALA. I have a message for Basavanna. Will you deliver it to him? If you promise, I'll step out. On my own. If not, I'll stick to this linga: I'll be Markandeya and you play the messengers of Death—

JAGADEVA. You have our word, sir.

BIJJALA. If you fail, may the curse of Basavanna be upon your heads.

He gets up. He is weakening fast. He leans on the shoulder of MALLIBOMMA, who leads him out.

BIJJALA. Tell Basavanna . . . Say! What'll you say? . . . Damn! I had it all clear and lucid. All these days I sat there and thrashed it out with him in detail. Things we really should have talked about when we had the time but didn't—And now, I dry up. Oh, yes! Tell Basavanna we talked of many things in our time, but we never touched upon what matters. And that is—Blast! It was on the tip of my tongue and I've lost it. Wait!—

JAGADEVA (*impatient*). Are you done, sir?

BIJJALA looks at him in surprise. He lets go of MALLIBOMMA and moves to JAGADEVA. Leans on his shoulder.

BIJJALA. What's it, lad? Why are you so upset with me?

JAGADEVA stabs him. As BIJJALA collapses, he grabs JAGADEVA.

Why, Sovi? Why—why this anger?

JAGADEVA. I am not Sovi. I am not your son.

BIJJALA (*trying to embrace him*). Sovi, son—

JAGADEVA. Let go of me! I told you—I'm not your son!

JAGADEVA pushes BIJJALA, who rolls to the floor. Then he leans against the wall and retches. Others watch.

MALLIBOMMA. He's dead now. Are you happy?

JAGADEVA. Go away!

MALLIBOMMA. And you?

JAGADEVA. Go. I'm not coming with you.

All except JAGADEVA leave. He stares at BIJJALA's body, in a sort of delirium.

So this is your temple, Basavanna? These legs the pillars. This body the shrine. This head the golden cupola. And yet how easily does the moving freeze into immobility! A stab—a blow—and the river freezes. The blood clots. The body goes stiff. Look how this house of Lord Shiva shakes—rolls and pitches—and all it needs is a sprinkle of blood. And a stab—

As he goes into the sanctum, he sees the idol of the bull, Nandi, at the door, and addresses it.

You are watching, Basavanna? Good. I'm not afraid of death like my father. I am not afraid. Even of sacrilege. Watch. If you are Basavanna, I am Jagganna—the Solitary Saint.

Sits in front of the linga and plunges the dagger into himself.

Scene Fifteen

Kappadi. BASAVANNA with MALLIBOMMA and KALAYYA.

KALAYYA (*in tears*). The King stepped out only because he heard your name—

MALLIBOMMA *pats him on his back, calming him, while also suggesting that he's spoken enough.*

BASAVANNA. Go now. May Shiva be with you. *Sharan.*

KALAYYA and MALLIBOMMA *go away.*

Whose name? And whose face? Whose wound and whose blood? This carcass is mine. And I am also the King's slayer. So this is the last of Allama's tableaux. The festivities are over, the streets deserted. The night has departed and the world is silent. Lord of the Meeting Rivers, absorb this inner shrine into the fine tip of your flame. Until all becomes light. Light within light. The great dawn of light.

Scene Sixteen

A messenger comes running.

MESSENGER 1. Sir! Sir!

SOVIDEVA *enters with a few bodyguards.*

MESSENGER 1. Sir, Kalyan burns. People rush through its streets howling and screaming. No one to look after them, console them, protect them. Sir, you must save Kalyan—

He rushes out.

MESSENGER 2 (*enters*). The royal guards have gone on a rampage and started looting the city. Temples are sacked, trading houses torched. The city reels under gruesome tales of rape, murder and rioting. Sir, you must rush to Kalyan. (*Exits.*)

SOVIDEVA. Oh God! Why didn't anyone warn me this might happen? Why has everyone turned against me?

DAMODARA (*enters*). We should never have left Kalyan. I told you, sir, but it isn't too late yet. Let's build a new city from these ashes. A new—

SOVIDEVA. You! You are responsible for all this! I trusted you—

DAMODARA. Sir—

SOVIDEVA. Shut him up!

A guard strikes DAMODARA BHATTA with his sword. DAMODARA BHATTA collapses, blinking in surprise and dies.

For heaven's sake, I only said shut him up! Why is everybody against me? What shall I do now? The *sharanas* too are out to destroy me—that tribe of snakes! Annihilate them! Crush their progeny!

MESSENGER 3 (*enters*). News from Kappadi Sanganna! Basavanna is no more. They say he merged with the elements. Nothing else is known!

MESSANGER 3 (*enters*). Sir, the *sharanas* flee Kalyan. They spread out in all eight directions. One lot has plunged into the fever-ridden jungles of Uluvi. Another heads for Andhra—

SOVIDEVA. Pursue them. Don't let them escape. Men, women, children—cut them all down. Set the hounds after them. Search each wood, each bush. Burn the houses that give them shelter. Burn their books. Yes, the books! Tear them into shreds and consign them to the wells. Their voices shall be stilled for ever—

Drums. Screams of women and children are heard, along with the noise of fighting.

With our realm in such dire straights, my brothers are marching on us. The villains! The traitors! It proves they had a hand in killing my dear father, my revered father, King Bijjala, founder of the glorious Kalachurya dynasty. Destroy them.

It is time to be wakeful, to be on guard.

The King is father to his people and the people shall love him and obey him like his offspring. No tongue shall wag against the King or his family or his retinue or his officers.

From this moment all *sharanas*, foreigners, and free thinkers are expelled from this land on pain of death. Women and the lower orders shall live within the norms prescribed by our ancient tradition, or else they'll suffer like dogs. Each citizen shall consider himself a soldier ready to lay down his life for the King. For the King is God incarnate!

Fire erupts in the background. Screams fill the skies. MANCHANNA KRAMITA and three other Brahmins enter, seat SOVIDEVA on a throne, hold the 'urn of thousand holes' on his head. Water jets out in a thousand streams and wets SOVIDEVA's head.

He continues to talk through all this.

They sing Vedic chants.

The eulogies begin and drown everything else.

HERALDS. Maharājadhirāja Kālāñjara-purādhīshwara Go-Brāhmaṇa-Pratipālaka Varnāshrama-dharma-Rakshaka Dush-ta-shāsana Suvarṇa-Vrīṣabhadhwaja Damaru-tūrya-nirghō shana Kalachūryavamsha-Kamala-Bhāskara Triambaka-pāda-padmadadhupa Parama-māheswara Pratāp-lankeshwara Giridurga-malla Ripu-kari-sandoha—simha Nisshanka-malla Bhujabalachakravarti Someshvara-Rajendra Bho parāk—Bho parāk!

SOVIDEVA continues to gesticulate violently. The fire continues to blaze in the background.